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While Charlie Was Away

By

Mrs. Poultney Bigelow

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While Charlie Was Away

Mrs. March to Lord Darraway

LETTER I

My dear Bill,

Why did you go and bury yourself in Ireland, and thus deprive me of my only safety-valve? To be sure I still talk a great deal, but when I seem to be most loquacious I'm always keeping something back. With you I told everything. Perhaps that is why you went to Ireland. You thought that "the price of peace" was to put that stormy bit of water between us! Lately I have wondered why we gave up corresponding, and I've begun to feel the want of it terribly. Can't we begin again? Do you know, Bill, I've got to a time in my life

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when I need support—not only financial (which I can't accept even from you), but a kind of moral prop, which only my cousin Bill can supply. The time of life I've got to is horrid; people don't talk about it much; I call it the pepper-and-salt stage—that is, the age when one's front hair begins not to match one's back hair. I still look young in the back; my waist goes in beautifully, thanks to a resolute meat diet during a portion of every year. My toque (which is always a smart one—you remember my taste in hats?) shows warm chestnut locks at the back; but in front—isn't it disgusting? Nature has crimped my hair, but the early snow of premature middle age has begun to powder the waves. Men tell me it is "fetching"—the sort of men who swear they love a pug nose unless they're talking to a woman with a Grecian one! Thank Heaven you are all liars! What should we do if you told us the truth? Yes, Bill, I

who was once Early English have become medieval. Of course, in my case inconvenient milestones are lacking—I have no children. I often wish I had had a baby or two—to *snoozle*—their heads are so nice to browse on. The softest things in the world are horses' noses, the soles of new boots, and babies' heads. Borrow a baby, and see if I'm not right; you've got horses and boots.

What is so tiresome about me is that, as my face grows older my heart grows younger. All the blows which I've sustained during my earthly pilgrimage have left my powers of credulity unimpaired. I am always meeting somebody whom I think I could love. The somebody always has a previous attachment; or else he sails for South Africa, or India, or the North Pole, a day or two after I meet him. Charlie doesn't count. What *is* the good of a husband who's a sailor, and who lives principally on

the West Coast of Africa? Charlie is, I suppose, an able navigator—and yet he expects plain sailing with me! Well, nobody has got a chart of my mental make up but you, Bill. I've the most heavenly idea of friendship, but men don't like it. They either make love to me, or call on me once in three months and talk politics. I want a man who will run errands for me—take me to the play—save me trouble at every turn—and dote upon me—discreetly. Now I find that if they dote they ain't discreet, and if they're discreet they don't dote. It's very discouraging. I tell Charlie that for me he doesn't exist. If one day in a fit of absence of mind I should marry somebody, there isn't a judge in all England who would convict me of bigamy. How *can* one believe in a husband whom one never sees? It would at once elevate a man to the level of the divine! and Charlie is not a bit Godlike.

Ever since I was ten years old I have fancied myself in love; my heart has been always like a pneumatic tyre; when punctured it becomes empty. But soon the breath of a fresh inspiration inflates it to its normal dimensions and it rolls on—triumphantly till it meets the next tack!

You were my first love, Bill. You had been abroad for years at school, and you came to mamma's for the Easter holidays. Do you remember? There was something about you which bowled me over. That first evening I was allowed to come down to dessert. Nurse left me alone for a few minutes; I stood before the glass, and tied a blue ribbon amongst my curls.

"Ah!" I sighed dramatically, to my image in the mirror, "I have someone to dress for now!"

Wasn't that delicious? Ever since I've been having "someone to dress for." I never put on a low gown (my shoulders are still

very good, people tell me) without a sense of adventure, of expectancy. All my life I've been on tiptoe to meet the romance which hasn't come. Tragic, that!

But this is tiresome. Tell me, dear Bill, whether you are willing to be my father confessor? I shan't shock you much. My sins are all potential.

Your affectionate

MARY.

P.S.—Do you remember my telling you that I was "hungry for love"? I am still, but I dare not say so. Hungry is a word not to be used in public by a woman who weighs nearly twelve stone! It is only Providence who sees the heart.

Lord Darraway to Mrs. March

LETTER I

My very dear Mary,

The sight of your handwriting at first perplexed me, it was so familiar, yet so strange. I had not seen it for two years. What suddenly made you remember me? I bless the cause, whatever it was. Need I tell you that I never have lost interest in you—never for a moment? My reason for settling in Ireland was not, as you pretend to think, for the purpose of getting rid of my favourite cousin. When Uncle Darraway died I was obliged to come. My one virtue is that I'm a painstaking landlord, not an absentee, and fairly popular with my tenants. Being a conscientious Irish landlord is not all beer and skittles,

as no doubt you know. And yet I love my home. I am not the cockney that you are. London grows very irksome to me after a few weeks.

What you say about yourself is delightfully amusing. No one ever wrote or talked like you, Mary; but I can't imagine you middle-aged. To me you are always the auburn-haired, brown-eyed, clever, rather hoydenish girl whom I used to see so much of at one time. To this day I am living on your witticisms. I fire them off at dinner-parties; but I always preface them with, "As my cousin says," not only because I am naturally honest, but because all my friends know me too well to believe me capable of your *jeux d'esprit.*

You tell me that you are "hungry for love." That is a dangerous frame of mind. There are plenty of unscrupulous men going about who would be interested to know this, and willing to profit by it.

Your one fault was lack of reserve. Don't be vexed with me, dear; it must be exceedingly hard for such a brilliant woman as you to keep a guard on her tongue, especially as everyone enjoys your conversation, and urges you on to further revelations. Few men are to be trusted. The man who thinks lightly of a woman's honour has very little of his own. Remember that. You are essentially pure and straightforward, and your position is a difficult one. Don't forget that there is such a person as Charlie, though he *is* on the West Coast, and that he believes in you. You will say I ought to have been a parson. Yes, I will be your confessor; the prospect doesn't terrify me. Do write often, even if I send you only a scrap in return. I'm a dull letter-writer; but I'm also

Your very affectionate

BILL.

Mrs. March to Lord Darraway

LETTER II

Bill dear,

You've lived longer than I have; and as Charlie is always in West Africa, I simply *must* have a nice man to advise me. Tell me, Bill, what connection there is between cabs and kisses? They don't even begin with the same letter, though they sound as if they did. What is there about hansoms that makes one feel skittish? One always feels awfully correct in a four-wheeler. I think a growler is festooned with associations of a domestic nature—astral bath-tubs and prams and nursery tin-boxes cling to the roof long after the solid objective forms have left it. Whereas the hansom suggests—well, all sorts of de-

lightful things: the orange lights of blue, half-misty, nocturnal London; theatres, suppers; pretty opera-cloaks with collars, over which pretty women look at nice clean men with beautiful shirt-fronts and cigarettes. Yes, Mr. Hansom, in the place of departed inventors, has much to answer for. I don't care much about the little lamps at the back. The light is trying to a face over thirty (and you know, Bill, mine is over thirty). I always get Val, or George, or Willie, or any of my theatre-men to put out the lamp, and then it smells to heaven—or, at least, to the roof of the hansom.

Have you ever noticed that when you're with a perfectly delightful man the horse is very fleet and sound? He arrives almost before he starts; whereas, when one's companion is rather boresome, the poor old animal limps on three legs.

Another thing worries me, Bill. Why does

no man try to make love to me unless he's mad or drunk? There was one poor thing who wanted to kiss me—in a four-wheeler, too. I covered my head in my cloak and threatened to call the police. Well, in a few weeks that man was in an asylum raving mad. Whether he went mad because he couldn't kiss me, or wanted to kiss me because he was mad, I never knew. I hope the former, but fear the latter. Men—sane ones—won't take me seriously; they think me a flirt. Stephen—a friend of mine who tells me the truth about myself, in spite of all I can do to prevent it—says I have "good eyes." Isn't that tiresome?

I believe a Calvinistic bringing up always gets the best of you. You smother it, and think it's done for; and it goes and sits behind your eyes where you can't see it, but everyone else can. It keeps people off. Bill, I've heard men called devils; they're not. "*Resist* the devil, and he will flee from

you." *Don't* resist a man, and he'll flee quicker than any devil. You try ; but you can't, not being a woman, you lucky creature !

I once had a real declaration in a hansom. It wasn't really very proper, except that I didn't like the man, which made it all right for me, if not for him.

He was an American. A man sent to me by Beatrice. You remember that my sister Beatrice married an American and lives in New York. She has a train of admirers ranging in age from twenty to sixty. This man was one—he was about forty. Beatrice had been bored by him, and turned him loose on me. He was very tall, and looked rather like an American Indian. He had a large nose, which he used a good deal in talking. He asked me to go to the play, and though I didn't want to go, I hesitated to hurt his feelings by declining. I meant to keep it dark ; but he at once

told one of the secretaries of his Embassy —a most exclusive person who stands well with the aristocracy—and I really was vexed. However, my motto is : " Don't do anything you're ashamed of, or don't be ashamed of anything you do." My strong card is candour ; I tell everything about myself before anybody has a chance to find it out. Therefore, my friend came to dine, and we went to the play—in a hansom.

I never felt calmer in my life. I couldn't have summoned up so much as a coquettish look. The cab might as well have been a bus—I had lots of room. All went well. We sat out the play, and I was more interested in that than in my aboriginal gentleman.

You have heard of " bolts from the blue." I got one. Just as my swain was putting on my cloak he whispered with some calmness : " I have loved you ever since I first saw you."

For the first time I experienced a slight thrill of interest in the Senator. I said only: "Save the rest till we catch a cab."

When we were safely in I said: "Mr. ——, you interest me. Go on."

I'm sorry that even the American penholder which I am now using cannot enable me to reproduce his accent. You've been in the States; lay it on for yourself, please.

"Mrs. March" (a Western *r*), "ever since I saw you I felt your attraction. When I saw you to-night it was all I could do not to take you in my arms!"

"Dear me! How lucky you didn't! I should have been so surprised!"

All this time he hugged nothing but his side of the cab. He was not frivolous; his love-making was serious. I bubbled inwardly, feeling like a kettle just on the boil; but my face was, I think, calm. I did wish Charlie had been there; but then, of

course, nothing would have happened. I thought of the virtuous indignation which ought to be displayed by an insulted matron; but somehow I couldn't feel it. I couldn't stop him. I never was able to leave the theatre before the end of the first act, even when the play was improper.

"Now," continued Mr. ——, "I think you are unhappy."

"There is a void in my life," I sighed modestly.

"I knew it," said he. "You are a neglected and unappreciated woman." (I sighed again. This was too true.) "I want to make you happy. I will be your friend, your confidant, or your lover. It is for you to choose." It was my first square offer. I pondered. Then, in a silvery voice, I began. You needn't hear all my speech. It was very beautiful, very touching, very pure. I partly meant it and partly I didn't. (You know what humbugs we all are, *really*.) It

began: "Love has no place in my programme," and it ended with remarks in praise of goodness. Do you know, Bill, if it hadn't amused me it would have made me sick. And then a horrid little thought reared its ugly head like a venomous little snake: "Would you have answered like that if it had been ——, or ——, or even ——?" Oh, we're all horrid, more or less.

My admirer went on to say that it was a sin to stifle one's emotions. You know the sort of thing—rather like a free-love tract, I fancy, though I never read one.

I said, with a sudden wholesome sense of amusement: "What should I get out of this arrangement? You told me your income was precarious, and I don't love you."

That was a poser! He was silent till the cab drew up at my little house. As he was still speechless, I went on: "We can never

go anywhere together again, Mr. ——. You have betrayed my confidence; you have taken advantage of me." He began to justify himself while I rang the bell (I had no latch-key that night), and my vigilant little maid Janet let me in before he got through his first sentence. So offended Virtue stalked into the house and slammed the door on unsuccessful Vice.

Would you believe it? He came to call two days after, and got on to his knees, asking me to kiss him good-bye; and I hauled him up just as Mrs. Brabazon was announced! In the course of conversation after he'd gone she said: "How carelessly American politicians dress! Mr. ——'s knees were quite dusty!" That was a nasty one for—for my housemaid!

So thus, my dear Bill, ends my observations on the moral effect of the hansom cab. I am, however, still collecting data.

M. M.

Lord Darraway to Mrs. March

LETTER II

My dear Mary,

Your letter about cabs has almost killed me. I've got a stitch in my side still from laughing. How naughty, how *shameless* you are! but how irresistible! No wonder that even growlers have no restraining influence on a man when he's in one with you! But I hope some day I shall have the pleasure of punching your Yankee's head. What an extraordinary woman you are! You experiment on these helpless creatures, and yet you belong to the Anti-Vivisectionist Society! I don't understand philandering. I know love, and I know friendship, but on the slippery debatable land between I shall never set my feet.

Constant coquetry is very unwholesome. It is enervating to the mind, it takes off the bloom of a woman's purity, and is as pernicious as constant dram-drinking. I very much fear that you are incapable of friendship ; but Lord ! you *are* funny ! I can't be hard on you when you write such letters all for me.

It's a pity you were brought up a Calvinist. The rebound in middle-age is generally appalling. I wish you would become a Catholic, and have a real confessor. I suspect you'll end up that way.

BILL.

Mrs. March to Lord Darraway

LETTER III

My dear Bill,

Do you know Mrs. Bobby Brabazon?—a good-looking woman, ten years older than I am, who looks ten years younger. I hate women to be like that, don't you? It's so deceitful. Mrs. Bobby (as her intimates call her) is a widow. She has three daughters concealed somewhere on the Continent, "learning languages," she says. People who don't like Mrs. B. say that the girls have been there so long that they have learned every available tongue, including Russian, and that they sail next month (with a governess) for Japan—just in time for the cherry-blossoms. Miss White says

the eldest daughter is married, and has a baby; but I don't believe that. Nobody who knows Mrs. Bobby could think she would ever allow anyone to make her a grandmother.

Mrs. Bobby is very soft and sweet. She is a kind of moral survival of the medieval prisoners. She picks out a victim and distils little drops of calumny into his cup of life, until she has killed his reputation, and she purrs so gently all the time! She has large green eyes, quite lovely, and she fastens them on your face, and what with them and her rolls of beautiful golden hairs, and her sweet little undulating gestures, you are hypnotized, and find yourself babbling the secrets of your soul; and next day you go out to tea and meet them —with trimmings. Mrs. Bobby tells all her own secrets, too; she doesn't spare herself; but somehow she tells them so nicely they seem all right. If she were to say to you

that she had killed her late husband, you would think: "Quite right! No doubt he deserved it," whereas, in point of fact, I believe he killed himself.

Mrs. Brabazon went out to tea the other day—she haunts teas—looking lovely and disgustingly young in a big black hat, the kind that kicks up and makes one side of you look saucy, and drops down on the other and gives your right cheek a sentimental retired air. She began talking to me.

"Isn't it sad, dear Mrs. March, to think that the truth has come out at last about poor Jimmy Southcote?"

"What about him?" said I, girding on the mental armour which I keep exclusively for tilts with this lady.

"Why, he killed his grandmother, you know; that we all knew, but of course one never liked to mention it. It was one of those understood things which aren't

said." ("I wish there were a few more," thought I.)

"It was for the rubies, you know—the famous Southcote rubies. Poor Lord Jimmy was in love with Ruby Montague —the girl with the high kick; you've seen her. She was always uppish (her papa was a fishmonger), and she would wear nothing but rubies, because of her name. Rubies are scarce, you know."

"As scarce as truth," I acquiesced, with a bite of muffin.

"Oh, scarcer. Well, Jimmy thought the old lady had lived long enough—eighty years, really, are a pretty good innings!— and he gave her insect-powder in her barley-water. Unfortunately, the nurse suspected it, and has now begun to talk about it. Rather mean of her, I call it. I suspect she got no legacy."

I could only gasp, accustomed as I am to Mrs. Bobby; but I had no time to

speak. An elderly, frumpy lady, badly dressed, pushed forward from behind us.

"Madam," said she in an awful voice, "do you know that you are talking about my son?"

Mrs. Bobby didn't turn a hair. She looked at the livid lady and cooed.

"Really?" said she. "How deeply, *deeply* interesting! So you are Lady Coteworth?"

"I am, madam."

"*So* charmed! *Now*, you can tell me whether it *was* insect-powder or a disinfectant. And *are* the rubies really worth all that trouble?"

"Madam," thundered the Marchioness (it really was she), "let me tell you that, first of all, my mother-in-law is *not* dead; and, secondly, she never had any rubies!"

"Good gracious!" said Mrs. Bobby. "How malicious people are!"

"But," proceeded Lady Coteworth, "thank God there is a *libel law!*" and she marched off, I think, to fetch a policeman.

But Mrs. Bobby left a few moments after for the Clover Club, of which she is the brightest ornament.

I hadn't done gasping when young Bankes came up. (Valentine Bankes is a tall boy with golden hair and a beautiful mouth. His father was an actor, and so is he—at least he's on the stage.)

"What was the dear lady saying? Anything about me?" he asked in his delicious voice. (He is a dear lamb! I must cultivate him.)

"No, dear child," said I. (I'm by way of mothering Val, as he's an orphan.) "She had no time for you. She was romping about in the House of Lords."

"Well, you needn't snub me," said Val. (He is six feet two, and so sweet!) "The next House of Lords will be half Ameri-

can and half theatrical. If there aren't any actors there, there will at least be plenty of actresses' sons."

"The actors," I observed, "are mostly in the Commons."

"I'm *so* glad to see you!" he sighed.

That was perfectly irrelevant, I thought.

"Don't look at me," said I. "I'm getting old and ugly."

"I hate young pretty women," said the child.

(Oh, Bill! what *can* you do with a boy like that?)

"You're hopeless," I said.

"I wish you could make me less so."

(That wasn't bad for the lamb; he's rather inarticulate, like most very big men.)

"You won't do," I said. "I'm looking for something to guide me—to be a pole-star."

"Oh, let me be your pole-star!" he said, looking red and eager.

"You're all right for a pole, dear Val;

but I'm blest if you'll ever be a star!" said I.

Wasn't that rather smart? I did so enjoy my own joke (you know, I always did); but Val went off looking awfully sad, and I saw him drinking three cups of poisonous strong tea. I must see more of Val.

Mrs. March to Lord Darraway

LETTER IV

My dear Bill,

Do you like restaurants? Charlie never will go to one. If I ever want to give the maids a holiday, and propose a meal somewhere, he says: "Some bread and milk or cold meat will do for me. I'm no trouble. But I won't go to a restaurant."

No trouble, indeed! As if that kind of a man wasn't more troublesome than any other kind! One's own man is, of course, the troublesome one; the others are delightful sphinxes—unsolved riddles. Husbands are like conundrums with the answers attached. No missing-word competition there; one guesses the word too quickly, and yet never gets the prize.

Instead of putting on a smart gown and going off in a hansom to a warm, bright place full of people, eating a good dinner invented by somebody else (which is the great thing) and drinking a little champagne as a treat, I sit down at home over a gas-fire and eat horrible cold ham, while Charlie munches bread-and-butter and doesn't know the difference; and after feeding—you can't call it eating—he reads Captain Mahan's sea-books till bedtime. Well, Charlie, thanks be to the Admiralty, is in West Africa. The Admiralty mayn't be strong on tube-boilers, but it has relieved me of Charlie. It serves him right that there are no restaurants on the West Coast.

These caustic remarks are a preface to the statement that Herbert Forbes last week asked me to dine at the Criterion in the East Room, and go to his play. The lucky creature has two plays running at once,

besides being one of the most celebrated authors of the present day. Did you ever meet Forbes? Of course, you know his delightful books. Everyone loves them, except rival authors, who are nearly dead of envy because they didn't write them themselves. Herbert's a dear! We don't often meet, but when we do we are excellent friends. He dines with me at least once a year, and I generally go to a jolly restaurant luncheon with him every few months. He is one of the men who, having got to the top of the tree, find it unsatisfactory, and look as if they want to jump down. He looks ascetic and sacerdotal, but I don't believe he is. As his fame grows his baldness increases. His hot brain has burned a hole in his hair. For six years I have murmured to him at dinners between the courses such suggestive words as "Rosemary water—Koko—Macassar," but he has so little vanity that he contin-

ues to neglect his looks. His midnight oil evidently isn't hair-oil.

I always feel awfully flattered by the slightest attention from Bertie; so when he asked me whether we should dine alone, or ask other people, my heart leaped with pride. The invitation came when Kate Vernon was with me. You don't know Kate. She is the only person, except Stephen, who always tells me the truth—and yet I'm fond of her. She is a moral, soda-mint tablet. She cures mental indigestion, only I won't always swallow her.

"Look here," said I: "am I old enough to dine in the East Room with Bertie Forbes—alone?"

"Has he taken the whole room, then?" said she. "Dear me! Bertie must be prosperous."

"Don't be silly! You know quite well what I mean. We shall be alone at the table."

'There'll be a waiter or two I suppose?"
Kate maddens me!
"*Am I old enough to go?*" I roared.
"My dear, you are old enough for anything—even to settle down."
Wasn't that a stinger? I nearly cried.
"Oh, Kate!" I almost sobbed. "You *are* horrid!"
"I've got a new name for you, Mary," said she.
"Not 'Forward, March'? I've heard that."
"No. The Octopus."
"Why? That's a big devil-fish."
"I know; and you've sometimes got more devil in you than fish, I'll admit. But, like the octopus, you are always reaching out. You told me so yourself."
"Reaching out! Oh yes; for sympathy—and love."
"Tell me, now, Mary, do you ever catch anything? Honour bright, now!"

I was so angry that I smoked a whole cigarette without speaking. Kate quietly drank two cups of tea, then observed:

"There's another thing in which you resemble the octopus. You spatter your whereabouts with floods of ink."

This was a malicious allusion to my letters to you, Bill.

"Well," said I, "every author is in that sense a devil-fish."

"Printer's devil," murmured Kate.

"He conceals his identity by means of ink."

"Or advertises it like ——" Here she mentioned two of our really popular novelists, missionaries to the servants' halls of England.

"*Do* stop playing on words," said I. "Can I go to dinner with Bertie?"

"Of course. You meant to all along."

So I wrote a note of acceptance, and went to the Burlington Arcade and bought a

pair of shoes. Shoes show so, getting in and out of hansoms. They were black satin, with little gilt buckles. My stockings were open-work black silk. I also had a lace-trimmed petticoat, which looks creamy and foamy under my black gown. My poor old black gown! It's horrid to be poor, Bill, unless you're a costermonger or something in the East End. There's some sense in it then. That old black satin holds together wonderfully, and still looks respectable—at least, the skirt does. The bodice hugs me demurely, except on the shoulders, where it threatens to leave altogether, but is coerced by black velvet straps, on which I pin diamond shamrocks. They always make me think of you, Bill, in Ireland.

I select my hair ornament according to my feelings. On the evenings when I've had a letter from Charlie and feel depressed, I look old and haggard—plumply

haggard, which is *too* awful; I wear a moth-eaten old bow that I've had for ages. When I feel chastened, but calmly hopeful, or I've had a Turkish bath, I don a wreath of violets. (Violets look discreet and non-committal.) When, however, the world has gone well with me, when the bills are low, and my balance at the bank rather higher than usual—when, in short, for the moment I ride on the crest of the wave, I stick in my hair a tall pair of steel wings that shine out boldly and challenge high heaven with their tips.

For Bertie's dinner I wore the wings. Though I arrived punctually—I'm always so punctual as to be ahead of time—Bertie was there. I sailed into the East Room, and found him waiting. It was nice to see him again, and he was very cordial. I was in wild spirits. I wanted to make a kind of innocent adventure of it. I hoped that Bertie would pretend to

like me a lot, just for the fun of that verbal fencing in which you tell me I am proficient. He is extremely witty, and doesn't keep his coruscations for the public alone. So many authors won't let their clever things drop unless there is paper at hand to catch them.

After we'd got through the commonplaces of conventional greeting, I said:

"I'm going to call you 'Bertie' this evening, if you don't mind; but not before people."

"Not before people, please," said Forbes, devouring his *hors d'œuvre.*

I refused to be chilled; I said:

"I've simply *dreamed* of this evening. It's such a pleasure!"

"That's all right," said Bertie, going on to soup. "I've ordered you an awfully good dinner."

"I'm not very hungry. Do pretend to be interested in me—just for one evening."

"The truth is, I've got out of the habit of falling in love—and I'm awfully interested in my new flat."

"Are love-making and flats incompatible?"

"On the contrary, they have been known to do well in conjunction, but mine is a highly moral flat."

"And you prefer this new interest to old friends?"

"Not exactly, but I'm mad just at present on my Chippendale furniture."

"Ah," I sighed, "I can't compete! I'm not built on Chippendale lines."

Forbes did me the honour to laugh.

"You are delicious, irrespective of lines," said he. "Try this sauce; it's good. I'm awfully hungry."

"So you seem. I love to see you so—healthy."

"I've been ill, you know—heart all wrong."

" It's all right now, I imagine."

" Yes, thank goodness ! "

The sweetbread stopped his utterance. Presently, " How's Charlie ? " asked he.

" Oh, just the same, I suppose."

" I'm rather sorry for Charlie."

" Why ? He doesn't see much of me ! "

Bertie bowed gaily, and appeared to mean something flattering.

" You're hard on Charlie," he said.

That nearly touched me off, but I gulped champagne, and the crisis was drowned in the foam. Here I was, dining alone with a famous author, and I wasn't enjoying myself a bit. I looked round the room, and saw several quite stupid, common men — stockbrokers they looked like — making their companions quite happy.

I could have cried. Bertie, between two mouthfuls of *poulet rôti*, observed my sudden silence.

"What's the matter?" he asked genially.

"My dear girl, you're not eating?"

"I'm not a girl, nor dear, nor yours, *Mr. Forbes!*" I snapped.

Bertie laughed his peculiar drawly laugh. He can be so fascinating!

"Don't be vexed, Mrs. Charlie," he said sweetly. "I shan't bore you long. We shall be at the theatre in a quarter of an hour."

And so we were. We had the Royal box, and a jolly little room at the back where we smoked between the acts. It would have been charming if Bertie had cared whether I lived or died. But he didn't. I thought I'd ask him in when he took me home, and give him a whisky-and-soda. What do you think he did? He put me into a cab and said: "You won't think me rude, Mrs. March, will you, if I don't take you home? I've been very seedy, and my doctor forbids late hours."

"Of *course* not," I said fervently; "I *much* prefer to go alone! Good-night! It's been *such* a pleasure. Thanks *awfully*. . . ."

New shoes just for that!

Lord Darraway to Mrs. March

LETTER III

Dear Mary,

Your two letters came together, so I shall answer them at once. I'm a sort of running commentary on your cleverness—like the Gilbert and Sullivan choruses, rather.

Your pictures of London society make me love my empty old house. Women like Mrs. B. B. ought to be tarred and feathered, or ducked, as gossips and slanderers were in the good old days. Do spare poor young Bankes! and don't tell him he has got a lovely mouth. You are too original to say what every other woman has said already. It's bad enough for a boy to be handsome and on the stage, without his hearing about his mouth.

Lord Darraway to Mrs. March

Your account of your dinner with Herbert Forbes was delightful. But *why* should you buy new shoes on his account? You are angry because he wouldn't flirt with you. My dear, you are too good for this nonsense. Do try to take an interest in something! Sometimes I think I shall have to come to London, simply to look after you; but I can't get away. . . . Perhaps you would make me as silly as all the rest.

Your affectionate, but disapproving,

BILL.

Mrs. March to Lord Darraway

LETTER V

Every soul is born twins—two separate entities—Christian and Pagan, Cavalier and Puritan, Fool and Sage. All life is a sort of tug-of-war; after each bout one of them falls over, and lets the other have the rope. The Pagan luxuriates in the material, the Christian stands by making sour faces at him. The Cavalier rides off on pleasure bent, the Puritan looks after him, and shakes an austere finger. The Fool behaves according to his folly, and the Sage sits on the fence gravely taking notes, which he means to read aloud to his partner at some future time.

Isn't that deep? I thought of it yesterday, and I thought: "Bill will be surprised if I

drop my colloquial manner, and rise to such literary heights!" Aren't you? Your last letter was sterner than I deserve. You hint that I'm incurably frivolous, and ask what my shoes have to do with Herbert Forbes. Nothing; he didn't even see them. I am *not* frivolous; I am only an experimenter. The Bible—and even you must respect that authority—says: "Prove all things; cleave to that which is good." Now, when I really find something good, I shall cleave—like a bulldog! I'll send you a postcard.

Please read once more the above able paragraph relative to our dual nature.

One of my natures has done something rather awful—irrevocable. I can see you jump. "That wretched Mary!" you say. "What is she up to now?"

It happened like this. I spent Easter with my dear friend Kate Vernon, the truth-teller. She has a delightful cottage near

Godalming with a heavenly garden. Oh, how I love that garden! What is it about the spring of a daffodil that melts me so? Daffodils make me want to be good; I don't dare look at them much, for there's no use in trying that sort of thing unless one means to really go in for it.

Kate is a widow, and doesn't care much for men. Isn't it curious? She has dozens of men friends who like her extremely, and think her a good fellow. She hates to be loved; likes to be treated like a man. The word "sex" makes her almost as angry as it did Tolstoi after he'd had a dozen children. Kate has no children, and regrets it. She longs to have girls to bring up sensibly—that is, without sentiment.

Well, we were a hen-party; not a man in the place! Fancy me! Kate said I needed a week in which to think, and find out whether I had a soul. She is a rude old dear!

She began by a serious conversation. Here is a résumé :

"You are quite good-looking, full of talent, extremely attractive, and not nearly so mad as you like to appear ; but you have a grave fault. You must stop 'reaching out.' The more you go bleating about, saying that you want to be loved, the more nobody will love you. Besides, you *don't* want to be loved. You'd be frightened to death if a man really loved you. You give everyone a false impression ; you're a perfectly proper goose, and I hate to see you waste yourself on such nonsense. Buck up, and do something ! There are other things in life besides love—in fact, there's no such thing as love."

Here I gasped. That seemed like a negation of the sun in the sky.

"No," proceeded Kate, "love to be real must be quite unmixed with self. A man

says he loves you; he means he wants something that you can give him: it may be your life, yourself, or only a comfortable meal; but they all want something. What men call love has nothing celestial in it. You were not born yesterday; look the world in the face, as I do."

"I prefer the world's face veiled," said I.

"It will look all the uglier when the veil comes off, which it will, sooner or later. For Heaven's sake," she ended up, "*don't bleat.*"

Next morning, after my early tea, I wrote the following gem:

"BLEATS.

"On the grass the lambkins lie,
Bleating at each passer-by;
When they're lonely, or would eat,
It is proper they should bleat;
They can make their wishes known
Only in that plaintive tone.

"But a woman (although cracked)
Must employ a finer tact.
When a lady, far from thin,
Putting on a double chin,
Reaches out, below, above,
Right and left, in search of love,
Heartless laughs are apt to greet
Every amorous sigh and bleat.

"MORAL.

"Ladies weighing thirteen stone
Must contrive to pine alone"—

only, of course, I don't weigh thirteen stone. "Eleven" would have spoiled the metre.

All this time, Bill, you've been chafing terribly, and breaking out: "What's the awful thing Mary has done?" I love to make you fume—you're so respectable; yet I love you, Bill—you know that. Well, this is the thing I've done. Stopping with Kate was a really lovely woman, a Mrs. Trapper. She has a camellia skin and ma-

hogany hair. She was good enough to take an interest in me. . . . I don't think she's like Kate and Tolstoi. She doesn't altogether disapprove of men, and I fancy they admire her. She told me I was too young to be going about with streaky front hair. In two days' time she had given me face massage—it's delicious. I must tell you about it. They say Christian Science is wonderful for the skin; if you try it, though, don't neglect the massage. First Mrs. Trapper steamed my face till it was hot and wet. Then with lovely coaxing fingers she rubbed into the pores a sort of cream which smelt of verbena. Then she dashed hazeline on me, and finally sponged my face all over with a mixture of pinkish powder and rose-water. I declare, Bill, I looked ten years nearer the age that my heart is! Only the streaky hair spoilt it. Mrs. Trapper then told me that I simply must go to

her place and get my hair "touched up." "Touched up" sounds so *much* pleasanter than dyed, doesn't it?

I promised to think it over. There was a Christian Scientist at Kate's, who said that if I gave her time she could turn me brown again without dye; but I told her that time was the one thing I hadn't got to give, as I was on the highroad to forty. Then, besides, how did I know that she would get the right shade? You couldn't say: "Just evolve me from your inner consciousness, please, a shade or two for hair, so I can choose!" You see the paraphernalia of the Christian Scientist is invisible. I looked all through the book which Mrs. Gulling had, but couldn't find one word about the complexion. I think a new religion which leaves out such an important subject can't amount to much. Even the Old Testament notices that David and Absalom were good-looking

chaps, and David was "ruddy"; so I think Christian Science can afford to take an interest in skins. It does seem hard that, when such nasty beasts as snakes get a new skin every year, pretty women have to wear the same one all their lives. How joyfully would I wriggle out of mine! . . .

Next week I shall try Christian Science. But, meanwhile, hold your breath, Bill; here comes the long-expected shock—*I've dyed my hair!* At least a Frenchman in Buckingham Palace Road has. I went quickly before I had time to think. I felt as fluttered as if I had been going to a rendezvous. It was a terrible job! I little thought, when I saw actresses with lovely dyed hair, what fatigue the poor things had suffered to secure the effect. I was at that place three mortal hours. First they shampooed me, then they rubbed ammonia into my scalp till I nearly screamed.

The man knew no English, and, unfortunately, of late years my French comes out German. Next some stuff was literally combed into my hair; that took ages. Next another stuff; and oh, Bill, when the first spongeful of colour was put on, I experienced what the barber called *des émotions!* I can hardly explain what I felt. . . . I shut my eyes and almost prayed. . . . Well, it was too late. My hair was a divine chestnut! Ten years more taken off!—head and heart approaching each other chronologically! I wasn't sorry then, Bill. After suffering another shampoo, my nice Frenchman, who had murmured to me frequently to be calm, dressed my lovely ruddy mane to perfection, with the wickedest part on one side. . . . I'm like a child ever since! I'm dying to know, though, whether dyed hair has any moral effect; I must wait and see. That afternoon I met Val Bankes.

He stared at me and opened his beautiful mouth till he nearly showed his wisdom teeth.

"Oh, Mrs. Charlie, what *have* you done?" he gasped.

"Made myself nearer your age, dear boy," said I. "I was tired of being taken for your mother."

"Oh, your lovely gray hair!" he wailed. "You've spoiled yourself!"

"You're a disagreeable boy," I said, and left him. When I looked back his mouth was still open. But I don't live or *dye* (what a pun!) to please Val Bankes. *I'm* perfectly delighted.

MARY.

Lord Darraway to Mrs. March

LETTER IV

MARY, Mary! What have you done? That clever, entertaining letter was simply to lead up to the odious, vulgar, *damnable* fact that you've dyed your hair! Now, indeed, I begin to lose hope. Charlie had better chuck the navy, and come home. Do you realize, I wonder, how common, how *low* it is for a respectable woman of your age—for I believe you *are* still respectable—to make up like this? Couldn't you realize that those who love you don't care whether you're getting gray or not? What would it be to me if, when I met you, I should see that you had aged—that you were fading and losing the beauty of youth? You would still be my Mary—the

only woman. . . . Well, I can't write about it. *I* am quite gray. Shall I make myself golden or red? Which would you like best? And will "Val" teach me to make up, do you think? By Jove! I never was so angry with you! Stop and think, and repent of this hideous foolishness, and try to remember that you're a lady!

DARRAWAY.

Mrs. March to Lord Darraway

LETTER VI

Bill, I'm having a *beastly* time! First, I get your outrageous letter about my hair. I declare I'd never write to you again if it were not for the fact that I look upon these letters as a safety-valve, and I must send them to somebody. In future I shall consider you in the light of a post-office —nothing more.

Your disagreeable letter wasn't all. When I got home I found that my new hair spoilt the whole house. You don't know my dear little house? I love it, and often deny myself clothes so that I may keep it clean and pretty. And now I'm so discouraged that I want to go and live somewhere far away. Burmah appeals to me

most; it is full of pagodas and divorces . . . but I'm not quite calm enough yet to take up with Buddhism.

Red, you know, is my favourite colour. My drawing-room is red—*was* red. When I got home I went straight to a ducky old mirror in the drawing-room. It was awful! —I mean *I* looked awful. The room swore at my hair and my hair simply cursed at the room! What could I do? Hair-dye is more or less a fixture. . . . I had never thought of the paper. There was my grandfather-chair, where I always sit when men come to tea. How often I've been told that my gray hair looked charming against that dull-red background! *Now* it was hideous. I fetched a hand-glass and looked. I tell you I had more "*emotions.*" . . . And the season is beginning, and I'm awfully hard up, as usual, and the British workman is a snail—only when he stops with you he doesn't bring his own

house, but takes possession of yours! I cried bitterly; and then, of course, my eyes were red—a third shade—and everything was worse than ever!

In the middle of all this, when Janet was trying to console me (she thought at first Charlie was dead! As if that——), well, in came my Irish friend, Brian L'Estrange. You know Mr. L'Estrange!—a mad, handsome creature, who shoots all over the earth to any place where there's a scrimmage, and when you think he's in Pekin or South Africa you see him at Prince's. He was looking quite lovely. He sat down by me, and said in his warm, South Irish voice: "My dear girl, whatever's the matter?"

"With me—or my hair?" I asked, still dewy about the eyes.

"Your hair?" said he, looking at it. "I'm blowed!" he exclaimed, with perfect simplicity.

"Is it awful?" I asked, cringing.

His beautiful, deep-blue, black-lashed eyes rested on my side-parting for several seconds.

"It has," said he, "the colour of the autumn leaf, before the frost has touched it."

I was *so* encouraged. How is it that an Irishman always says the right thing?

"But," proceeded Brian, "my dear girl, you've inverted the order of Nature. You let the frost get there first."

"You, too!" I almost wailed. "Val hates it too!"

"If Val hates it," said he solemnly, "it must be changed at once."

Then he became practical. We tried my hair against everything in the room—except Brian's waistcoat, as he said.

"The paper must go, that's certain," was his verdict. "So must that red brocade and these lamp-shades. In fact, there are precious few things that can stay in the

room with your hair. I hope, now," said he, "I'm one of the things!"

He *is* a good sort, and I did enjoy seeing him again.

We settled on green for the new decorations—dull green, not emerald. That would make me look like a geranium.

"Are you goin' to make up a bit now?" asked Brian, when we'd arranged about the furniture.

"*Must* I?" I quavered.

"I think, dear child, you must. But ask Val to come and experiment upon you. He'll know far more about grease-paint than I do." (Brian has a maddening complexion!)

"Mr. L'Estrange," said I, as he was going, "do you think my new hair will make me any giddier?"

He showed his brilliant teeth, and said in a voice fit to open an oyster without violence: "If it does, it's all right; I'm here. I'll help you to live up to your hair."

No sooner had Brian L'Estrange gone than Mrs. Brabazon came in. She must have passed Brian on the stairs. She was as full of coos as a wood-pigeon.

"Dear Mrs. Charlie," she began, "you look as if you'd had a scene! Has Mr. L'Estrange been very naughty?"

I settled my countenance.

"When are you going to publish your novel?" I asked.

"My novel?" said she. "I'm not writing one."

"But you're talking one all day long. It's a shame you don't write it," I replied.

"I have been told I could write."

"You have so much invention."

"I haven't time to try."

"Don't try; it does itself."

All this time her eyes were glued to my hair.

"How young you look!" she presently breathed gently. "Do you know, I think

youth is infectious. Now, you go about so much with young people that you seem younger every day." ("Young people" meant Valentine Bankes. She hates him because he won't let her coo at him.)

"Nobody gets old nowadays," said I courageously. "This is the day of the woman of forty. In Balzac's time the dangerous lady was thirty; soon she will be fifty. Twenty years from now the heroines will wear wigs and plumpers."

"It is freedom which keeps us young," said Mrs. Bobby. "I am a widow, and you are practically one, too. Husbands are very wearing on the nerves."

"Yes," said I dryly. "I'm not quite so much a widow as you are; my husband comes back."

"Mine doesn't," said she; "or if he does I don't know it. Since his death I have avoided séances."

That set me off into fits of laughter. I

was almost hysterical. Meanwhile Mrs. Bobby was drinking tea, which had arrived. She had one eye on my hair.

"I think," said she, "we are wise to preserve the appearance of youth as long as possible; and one should feel young one's self. That hypnotizes other people into believing it."

I could no longer resist.

"Well," I said, "like Swift, I've commenced to dye at the top."

She never winced.

"It's awfully well done, except one lock just behind the ear. You must have that touched up."

It really made me like the woman.

"You *are* clever!" I said. "You saw it all the time."

"Why clever? It's as plain as a sunset."

"Well, now, *is* it a mistake?"

"That depends on what you mean to do."

"What do you mean?"

"I suppose you know it's the colour of late suppers and divorces."

"Good heavens!"

"Yes. Didn't you know it? In some cases the dye comes first, then the divorce; in others the divorce leaves the coast clear for the dye."

"But I'm not going to have a divorce."

"It isn't necessary. You never see Captain March as it is. What will he say?"

"He won't see it."

"I thought there were no short-sighted men allowed in the navy?"

"He isn't short-sighted. He can see a ship miles off. He's only blind when he looks at me."

"What a convenient man! Away for three years, and blind the rest of the time."

There was a pause, then Mrs. Bobby said: "How's your little friend Val? I'm afraid you've been treating him badly."

"He's all right. I'm a mother to him."

"He has several other mothers. Mrs. Willie Breton is one. By the way, she's a *great* friend of Mr. L'Estrange."

"So I believe."

"You know I never believe ill of anyone; but they *say* that Willie Breton leaves the house as soon as L'Estrange comes into it."

"Well," said I, "this is the age of considerate husbands."

"Val Bankes is an innocent-looking boy; but don't trust him too far. He hates me now because I had to snub him horribly the other day."

This was more than I could bear. Mrs. Brabazon had risen, and was drawing her chiffon ruffle around her neck.

"Don't go," I said. "Do stay and tell me about my other friends. There's my cousin, Bill Darraway. What's the matter with him?"

I felt catlike at that moment.

"Lord Darraway is charming. I wonder you're not in love with him," said she.

"I am," said I, "and have been since I was six years old."

"How wise of him to live in Ireland!" she said as she kissed me. At the door she turned a moment. "I like your new hair, dear; it goes awfully well with your freckles."

As the door closed I threw myself on to the Chesterfield and chewed a red cushion.

Oh, Bill, *why* aren't you here? I enclose a lock of my hair.

MARY.

Mrs. March to Lord Darraway

LETTER VII

Darraway! I've had a galling week—simply killing. I wish you would *not* write to me any more. I've cried and cried every minute, except when I've been with Mr. L'Estrange in furniture shops, or having tea with Val in Bond Street, or at the play with Gilbert Lee. (He's a new one.) If you want me to bury myself, why don't you ask me to Ireland? I can't think why you never do. How can you expect me to stay at home and knit and read tracts? You *know* I'm perfectly good, and I think your remarks and warnings are absolutely insulting. Yes, my lord! You have ceased to be "Bill" to me. And yet somehow I can't stop writing to you.

It's one of those bad habits you say I have contracted.

But you are right about one thing. My old aunt (she was a Nonconformist) used to wag her head and say, "She who liveth in pleasure is dead while she liveth." That's one of those cheerful old texts that come to you when you have indigestion, and your best young man has wired you instead of coming to tea. What you're right about is that there isn't much fun in trying to have a good time. There are weeks when every single thing goes wrong, and this has been one of the weeks. I believe I'm a Jonah, without even a whale to swallow me.

You may think how low I feel when I tell you that I have worn that old black bow, which is losing its sequins, every evening. All the plays I've seen are either dull, indecent, harrowing, or all three. In one of them there were a lot of smart

women glittering with *paillettes*, sitting in a row like white female Christy Minstrels. They said clever things in turn all the way down the row, and then began again at the top. Nothing happened but *paillettes* and epigrams. I couldn't write a play—it's one of my negative virtues that I don't try—but I have a sort of idea what it ought to be. An epigram should spring from a situation, like a lily from the bulb. All these smart sayings are sewn on like sequins; they glitter, but you see the stitch. In that sort of play the butler would be as witty as the duchess. The characters are the masks through which the author shoots off his observations on society. This isn't psychology. It has the inorganic life of a crystal which forms accretions outside, not the vitality of the flower which expands from within.

The next play I tried was all about the fashionable subject—two women fighting over

one man. I suppose when a few more hundred men have died in South Africa, those who stop at home will be obliged to increase their precautions against what was once considered the gentler sex.

I felt quite sorry the other night for the hero; he looked so little and defenceless, with two of the tallest women in London slanging one another over his unprotected head, exactly like a toy-terrier between two angry mastiffs.

I came away depressed. Then next day, after waking and feeling rather yellow, I found that Harrod's book had come in, and I saw that I had had more people to dinner and luncheon than I could afford. Everything to do with money makes me feel hollow in the waist. Do you know the feeling? It's a kind of hollowness that goes all the way to your boots. That made me cry a little. Then I got your hateful letter, and that made me cry more. I had

an engagement at eleven to go with L'Estrange and select the green for the drawing-room. I wanted to cry off, and tell him I couldn't afford to get anything new, but I hadn't the courage. He was so nice that he made me forget my poverty. He came home to luncheon, and there was nothing decent to eat, and that plunged me again into despair. Isn't it awful to be so sensitive? I believe I don't walk enough; I shall do Whitely exercises in my room. . . . I wish I had an object in life! There are the poor, of course, but there are lots of people worrying them already, and I don't know why I should add a terror to poverty by calling upon them. It would be so hard to know what to say. I'm sure I should find myself asking, "Were you at the first night at the St. James's?" habit is so strong!

When Brian was gone, Mrs. Gulling arrived. She is the Christian Scientist I met

at Kate's. She noticed my hair, and asked me whether it was C. S. or dye. I told her I couldn't wait to "get on to 'the teaching,'" as they say in America.

She related wonderful things. One day she was in a hansom; the horse fell, and a big dray was nearly on his neck. With her mind she held the heavy wheel where it was, and it went no further; so the horse wasn't hurt at all. I expect if the horse had known what saved him, he would have been converted to Christian Science. Mrs. Gulling says she can be exactly what she wants to; she evidently doesn't want to be good-looking.

Perhaps *this* is what I've been wanting. All my life I've wanted something. I've gone in for various religions, theosophy, crystal-gazing, spiritualism, but not for this.

Do you remember when I was little my faith was so strong that when I was out

at tea, and wanted to stop longer, even when I saw nurse waiting for me in the hall, I used to retire to an empty room, flop down on my knees, and pray that she wouldn't come. If I could get that faith back, it ought to carry me far. . . . Yesterday I stopped writing because I had a sore throat. I thought I would try C. S. on it, so I shut myself up quite alone, and said out loud: "There is no such thing as pain." Then I swallowed hard, and it hurt just as much. Then I said: "I have no sore throat; it is only mortal mind." But it still hurt. Then I said very firmly: "I have no throat." But I could feel all the time that I did have a throat, for I was talking with it. So I only made myself a liar, and kept my sore throat. That night I went to a C. S. meeting. Mrs. Gulling was there. She got up and said the same things over and over. It was very soothing, and I dropped off and

had a little nap. When I woke a man was telling how he rid the house—"the 'ouse," he said—of black-beetles by gently reasoning with them. He said it was cheaper than borax or Keating. They were a very civil, superior sort of black-beetles, and they didn't come back. When I saw the man, I wasn't surprised that they didn't. But I still have a sore throat.

MARY.

Mrs. March to Lord Darraway

LETTER VIII

I HAVE just come back from a wedding—Mr. L'Estrange's sister and young Sir Harry Bruce. It has made me very sad; the girl promised all sorts of things she knew nothing about, and the groom knew so many things that he was rash to make any promises at all. She is seventeen, and looks like an apple-blossom. He is thirty, and has eaten a good many apples—out of other people's orchards. I almost hoped that she would have the courage to change her mind at the altar rail, but on the contrary she looked sickeningly in love with Sir Harry, who is at least handsome. I always remember hearing of a girl who left her young man at the altar before the par-

son began, because he stepped on her dress and said "Damn!" What a pity it is that more bridegrooms don't get nervous and say "Damn!" It would choke off the apple-blossom sort of girl, and prevent lots of matrimonial failures. Not that saying "Damn!" shows that a man's heart is bad. It means that his nerves require hypophosphates. In this neurotic age people should be judged leniently. Charlie is a very trying husband (when I see him), but I never heard him swear. If he were more violent, he would be less tiresome.

Marriages are terrible things. The Voice that breathed o'er Eden breathes over a Gehenna very often before the year is out, and then where are you? Isn't it preposterous to expect that two persons who have been brought up quite differently should ever settle down harmoniously together? Why should they? Then add the fact that they know nothing about each

other, and you've got very pretty material for a tragedy—a tragedy that lasts longer than a Chinese play, and has comic elements which add to its sordid horror.

You are saying, "That's all nonsense. I know lots of happy couples."

So do I—if you call it happy. It's the kind of happiness a cow has chewing her cud—the same thing over and over—or the resignation of a man with a life-sentence, or else the reasonable contentment of two people who agree to differ and keep out of each other's way.

I quite believe that the average woman has a genius for fidelity. Give her a man who is fond of her, will support her, and not hit her, and you'll find that she never looks at another man any harder than she does at a cabby or a policeman.

When I married Charlie I was as ductile as wax. And what has he made me? He's left me to be run into any mould that

came along. I sometimes ask myself why I'm as good as I am. One reason is, I believe in a God; and the other, I honestly think, is because far off, tucked away on a boggy green spot across the Irish Channel, is a disagreeable, crusty, truth-telling, quixotic old dear named Bill, who likes me to be good.

Bertie Forbes said I was hard on Charlie. Now, once and for ever, I'm going to refute that statement. When I met Charlie March I was four-and-twenty. I had had a dozen offers (*that* would make a funny book!), and I was tired of it all. I wanted to settle down. I had the most exalted ideals, though I'd been a bit of a flirt. (Kate says I shall flirt with the man who cremates at Woking!) But no man had ever kissed me—except you, Bill—that day. . . . Do you remember the gorse? It smelt like pine-apples and wine; and there were larks singing—oh, so high!—

in the blue. You only kissed me once. Why, Bill? We were cousins. . . . Well, you went away to Africa, long before Africa was the fashion, and before it became the fashion to die there; and then I met Charlie March. He was like plenty of other clean-shaven, keen-eyed young naval officers. I seemed to dazzle him, and he thought me clever; and somehow when he proposed I said "Yes!" I don't know why; but I think it was because I wanted love—the great cruel, gnawing want of my life, Bill!—and you weren't here to tell me what to do—and so—we married. . . .

Bill, he never made love to me!

The third day after we were engaged he read Macaulay to me! I shall never forget it. I sat on one end of the sofa, dying to be kissed, and he read me about the Bloody Assizes. I wanted to lay my head on his shoulder, and he kept telling me

how Monmouth laid his on the block! I *couldn't* say, "Kiss me! Kiss me! I've a great seething heartful of love and passion! Make it yours!" When we'd buried Monmouth, he proposed "a brisk walk." Bill, do you believe Adam, when he first saw Eve, said: "Come for a turn in the garden, my dear. It is good for your liver?" . . . But I suppose they lived on salad and grass, and had no livers.

When Charlie and I married, he was nice enough; but I knew that I was nothing at all to him compared to his profession. How often I've wished I were a binnacle, or a barnacle, or some of those queer nautical things I don't know the names of! The height of Charlie's ambition, outside of his career, was to see me darn stockings. I did seventeen one night, while he read to me (Froude on the Spanish Armada), and I have never stuck a needle into one since.

Then he went away for three years, and expected me to sit sewing till he came back. But I was no Penelope. When I spin, it is over the ground in a hansom on the way to the play; when I weave, it is impossible romances of what never was and never can be.

When Charlie writes to me, he ends with: "Do weigh your letters. The last two were overweight." Or else: "Try to keep down the expenses, and be more particular about the front stairs. When I was last at home I thought they looked dusty." . . . Dusty! It makes me want to be dusty—just a clean pinch of powder in a little urn on your mantelpiece, Bill! . . . I believe I'm crying. . . . I wonder why?

Oh, if husbands would take half the trouble to keep our love that other men take to try to get it, how few scandals and tragedies and tears there would be

in the world! . . . I'm not funny to-day, Bill, am I? People like me only when I am funny. "Mary March was the life of the party," they say. Nobody sees the face that I see in the little cab-mirror, on the way home. Isn't it terrible to be middle-aged and sentimental?

Certainly I need an occupation.

Your affectionate

MARY.

P.S.—Forgive these "bleats"!

Lord Darraway to Mrs. March

LETTER V

My dear, dear Mary,

I didn't suppose that at my age I should ever come near crying again; but, then, I had not bargained for the effect your letters would have upon me. Your letter about marriage has caused me more pain than I thought I could suffer. It has made me feel that you are a mass of magnificent material wasted. It is not you alone whom I pity. Poor Charlie, out on the God-forsaken West Coast doing his duty, blissfully unconscious that he has thrown away the cleverest, warmest-hearted woman in England—*that's* a picture which makes me sad, quite independent of your sorrows. You were born to

be unhappy—predestined, as your Calvinist aunt would say. No modern, neurotic, brilliant woman is easily satisfied. In thinking of you, in summing up your qualities, I doubt sometimes whether any kind of husband would have seemed satisfactory to you in the long-run. Your restless mind is like the sea—sometimes in wild disorder, sometimes glittering and rippling in the sun, but always with the long, deep swell underneath.

Do you think because I do humdrum, useful, unamusing things all day that I don't understand you? Why, it always seemed to me that we were two halves of something which Fate had sundered. I believe that Fate does that, or that Something higher than Fate, which we all believe in and worship in one way or another. One's affinity, to use a very hackneyed word, generally belongs to somebody else. That's a fact which must be faced. To stand

firm, to walk straight, to look Life in the face—a cruel stepmother face she shows to most of us !—are the only ways of bearing our burden.

You ask me why I went to Africa, Mary. No one but my uncle, who stood in the place of my dead father, knew at that time that I was threatened with consumption. A man who has a chance of dying of that disease must not seek to form any ties. You only knew that I was not quite robust, and that I went away for three years. When I returned my health was established and you—were married. There is the explanation in a nutshell.

I have always been glad that March was a gentleman. I wish he might have stayed with you, and given you all the love and care due to such a woman as you ; but I feel that everything might have been worse. When you were a girl you once said to me, when I was quoting exhorta-

tions from Marcus Aurelius: "Hang Marcus Aurelius! I wish he were alive, so that I might kill him!" That was one of the days when you were not resigned. . . . Yes, I remember the gorse. I never see it without remembering. Only death can rob us of the beauty of the spring; and every year its blossoms and its birds speak to me of that long gone day. There is one friend who will never fail you, Mary, whom nothing can ever estrange. I love to think that you care for my good opinion; but, as a matter of fact, no opinion of mine about you could ever be bad.

It would be a very dull, blind person who could fail to catch a glimpse of your white soul—of the real Mary. . . . I could write much more, but it would all be the same thing—that I am inalienably

Your devoted

Bill.

Mrs. March to Lord Darraway

LETTER IX

Dearest Bill,

What a brick you are! Why are you the only nice man alive? and why is my other half divorced from me by miles of land and water? . . . So that is why you went. Well, things are inscrutable. I mean to live a few thousand years somewhere, where everything is better managed. Perhaps we shall hit upon the same star, but I doubt it. I never have any luck where there's a male in the case. If I had an engagement with a tom-cat or a cockadoodle-doo I should come to grief over it.

Keep on liking me! I'm not worth it; but when I see myself through your eyes, I

feel proud for a week. I throw out my chest like a pouter pigeon, and walk as if I owned the whole street.

Your loving

MARY.

Mrs. March to Lord Darraway

LETTER X

VALENTINE BANKES has been rather tiresome. He chooses to think that he is desperately in love with me, and glowers at every man who talks to me. That sort of thing is amusing for a little while, but this is going too far. He follows me about, and you can't have a boy as tall as Cleopatra's Needle following you about unobserved. He is very well-born—his mother was an Honourable—and he has been well educated, but he isn't amusing. A handsome, brainless man always makes me think of a Dresden clock without works. Young actors are great fun up to a certain point; they always want you to admire their waistcoats. Val wears charming ones. It

isn't that the boy is conceited exactly ; he only takes an interest in himself. We all do, only some of us have the sense not to show it. I'm sure if I were as good-looking as Val I should fancy myself far more than he does.

As a rule, I don't cultivate "the profession." I've known a good many actors, and I always think that when the Creator was dealing out consciences He had a special sort of property ones for the people behind the footlights. Of course there are plenty of bad consciences "in front" too. How easily one drops into the jargon of the theatre! and how fashionable these people are! I remember when I was a young girl my mother wouldn't have an actor in the house, and now, if one is lucky enough to dine at their houses, one slinks in last, behind duchesses!

Val, as I say, is becoming oppressive. He's a dear boy, and I like him, but I don't

want his young affections, nor do I desire to blight them, so I have decided on a delightful plan. Val, as I say, has youth, beauty, and breeding, but next to no money; so I've determined to marry him off. The first steps are already taken. Charlie has a young cousin—a girl of twenty, who lives down in Cornwall. About a year ago her father died—her mother had been dead a long time—and left this child something like £40,000. She has lived all her life near Falmouth with an old aunt as duenna. This spring she sent me some violets, which reminded me of her existence. It suddenly occurred to me: What a wife for Val!

I wrote to her aunt and asked if the girl might pay me a visit, and the aunt consented. I have a dear little spare room, and Janet and I made a fresh pink nest of it. I felt quite motherly as I made a new pin-cushion all myself. Then I asked Val

to luncheon two days before I expected the girl.

He was in radiant looks, with that unquiet spark in his blue eyes which I don't want to see there, unless someone other than myself kindles it, and—he wore a new waistcoat! I should like to see that boy's tailor's bills! I wonder if he ever pays them. He began to say pretty things to me before luncheon, which is too early. Compliments, like champagne, should be administered only in the evening.

"Let us stick to the claret of commonplace," said I, having expounded my theory. "I want to ask you a favour."

He murmured that anything that *I* asked, etc., etc.

"Oh, it isn't much," said I; "only I want you to be civil to a girl who is coming here this week—Geraldine Treherne, Charlie's Cornish cousin."

Val twisted his beautiful mouth.

"A *girl*," he said.

"Yes, a girl, not a hippopotamus! Don't look like that; it destroys your looks."

He instantly smoothed himself out.

"And what on earth can I do with a girl?" he asked quite guilelessly.

"Help me to amuse her."

"But you always tell me I'm not amusing."

"You're not—to me; but you might be to a creature half my age, who has lived all her life on the Cornish coast."

"Is she pretty?"

"I haven't an idea."

"Has she money?"

"What's that to you? She wouldn't think of marrying you!" (Wasn't that artful?) It piqued Val.

"I'm not dreaming of marrying," said he. "You of all women ought to know that while I care for someone who is not free . . ."

"I left off pinafores and turned up my hair about the year you were born, Val. What a dear little golden-haired creature you must have been!" I observed.

"It's beastly to have golden hair. People never let you forget it. Why don't you say you are old enough to be my mother, Mrs. Charlie?"

He looked quite savage.

"Because it isn't true, Val. I'm only old enough to be your godmother. But now about Geraldine; you must be pleasant, but not too pleasant. She mustn't fall in love with you on any account."

Val smiled whimsically.

"If you see she's in danger, bring her to see me play. That'll put her off!"

"She's too ignorant to know how bad you are, my dear," said I; but I sweetened the insult with my best smile.

Before Bankes went I had made him quite curious to see Geraldine.

Two days after she came.

My dear Bill, are there no dressmakers in Cornwall? I saw in a moment that she must be totally reconstructed. Her sleeves were much too large; her skirt hung badly; her bodice wrinkled. Even her stays were all wrong — but, then, no Anglo-Saxon, it appears, can make stays. I've had six failures in two years, all because I was too poor to go to Paris, and I'm as much out of pocket as if I'd gone, and nothing to show for it but the fact (made obvious by London stays) that I weigh twelve stone. The child has a charming face, and *what* a complexion! If I could hate anyone, I should hate her; I covet her skin so. But her hair was dragged back so tight that it fairly lifted her eyebrows. There were masses of it—quite straight and glossy, nut-brown hair, well-cared for, but absolutely unfashionable.

"You won't mind if I pull you to pieces,

will you, dear?" I asked when she had had her tea.

She looked alarmed, and her divine complexion changed colour.

"Don't be frightened; I only mean you must be dressed. At present you're only covered."

"I believe I'm not very smart," she faltered. "Aunt Hester doesn't know much about clothes."

"I suppose you've all the money you want?" I asked.

"Oh yes!" said Gerry. "I can't spend it all."

That made me envious. My bills for the drawing-room will soon be coming in.

"Well," I said, "to-morrow we'll have a heavenly day in the West End shops, and in the evening we'll go to the theatre."

She clasped her hands.

"Oh, the theatre!" she gasped. "I've never been to the play!"

She made me feel a hundred, and yet there was a kind of hawthorny sweetness and freshness about her that did me good. I felt glad, Bill, that I was *only* frivolous.

Next day we bustled about to some purpose. By dinner-time she was a different girl. I had bought her a gown that revealed instead of deforming her lithe young figure. Her hair had been dressed and waved by my Buckingham Palace Road artist, and she wore a big bunch of violets at her breast and a small one in her head.

Val had sent us a box for the one of Bertie Forbes's plays in which he's acting, and after a neat little dinner we rolled off luxuriously in a brougham, for which Gerry paid.

Val looked simply god-like in a Charles II. costume—so beautiful that even I forgot his pump-handle style of love-making. His pretty voice, too, was melt-

ing. He could scarcely speak his lines, he was so interested in our box. Geraldine glowed like a rose. After the first act she said to me very shyly:

"I thought Mr.—Mr. Bankes"—here she consulted her play-bill—"smiled at us; but I must have been mistaken."

"Not at all," I said calmly; "Valentine Bankes is one of my dearest friends."

She drew a long breath.

"Does he—ever—come to your house?" she asked.

"Four days a week, dear. But I shan't let him come much while you're there; he's too attractive."

"Isn't he a—nice person?"

"Oh, unexceptional; but he's an actor! Perhaps your aunt wouldn't approve of your knowing him."

She drew herself up with very pretty dignity.

"I'm my own mistress, Cousin Mary."

"Knock off the 'Cousin,' Gerry. It makes me feel a thousand," said I.

I went to bed full of joy. Gerry was quiet, but I could see that she likes the pump-handle style. . . .

Yesterday Val lunched here. I asked the plainest, most uninteresting man I know as a foil — a good, middle-aged person, who wants to make everybody happy but himself. Strange to say, this line of conduct has made him perfectly serene. He is immensely Val's superior; but it is a sad fact that a perfect figure, yellow hair, and a dazzling smile make more surely for worldly success than a sallow complexion, joined with an altruistic ideal. It is unjust, but such is the case. Mr. Darnwell was perfectly unconscious that he was living up to his unselfish standards by setting off the attractions of a selfish young actor, whose adopted mother was bent on getting him a rich wife. It is

never wise to introduce several attractive men at once to a girl: it only confuses her. Brian L'Estrange would have spoilt the whole thing, for he has charm as well as beauty, and would have made Val appear about as magnetic as a pillar-box—or, rather, a lamp-post, for, after all, a pillar-box does woo our letters from us.

I didn't tell Geraldine till the last moment that Bankes was coming: it would have spoilt her complexion. As it was, when she entered the drawing-room (which is by this time green) the sight of the young man standing on the hearthrug in all the pride of his manly loveliness was nearly too much for the Cornish maiden.

I never saw Val so keen; he actually changed colour. He's very English, and stood there with nothing to say. Presently he faltered:

"I think we're going to have spring at last."

"Don't think if you can't do better than that," said I tartly.

Gerry looked shocked at my want of reverence.

Then Mr. Darnwell entered, beginning on the threshold to fizzle with his philanthropic schemes. Through the torrent of his eloquence shot little sprays of the conversation which was going on between those two absurd children. I gazed soulfully at Darnwell right in the eyes, and stretched my ears backward to catch what the two sillies were saying. It sounded somewhat like this:

"Ah! my dear Mrs. March, there is no doubt about it, if we seek happiness, we do not find it!"

"How true, Mr. Darnwell, how true!"

"I hope you liked the play, Miss Treherne, and didn't think me too awfully bad. . . ."

"Bad! Mr. Bankes! I never *saw* anyone so good."

"*Really?* How charming! I suppose you've seen Irving and Waller, and Forbes-Robertson, and all the swells? . . ."

"Oh no. I never was in a theatre before!"

I was dying to see Val's face, but Mr. Darnwell was droning along, occasionally breaking out into a more denunciatory tone. I saw that he was getting to the windmill stage, when his arms shoot out so long that he threatens the Dresden china, and one needs a sofa-cushion as a buffer. Luncheon was announced before any damage was done. It was a nice little meal—several dainty courses—and the table looked charming, thanks to pink tulips.

Everything suggests altruism to Mr. Darnwell. I'd forgotten that he was not only a total abstainer and an anti-vivisectionist, but a vegetarian. He heroically declined

cutlets in aspic (they looked so nice, with little curly cuffs on lying in a bed of lettuce), chicken — everything till the sweet came. He began telling me about the cruelties of the slaughter-house till I thought I should faint, and all the time he sacrificed thousands of innocent lives by drinking quantities of Thames water.

Meanwhile Gerry and Val had got deep into conversation. She was telling him about the beautiful rocky coast of Cornwall, and he was wishing he might see it—he who will hardly leave town even in summer to go further than to Ranelagh! She was waxing tender; by the time the mayonnaise arrived she had got to the pitying stage.

"Isn't the life of an actor awfully hard?" she asked, with divine compassion.

Val looked sad.

"Oh, awfully hard!" he acquiesced.

"It is when you dance all night, and go to tea-parties all the afternoon," I cut in. Darnwell was getting on my nerves.

Val gave me a reproving glance.

"It is a curious profession," said Darnwell, filling in the chinks with his dinner-roll; "for a grown man, the heir of all the ages, made in the image of God, to strut before the public in a character not his own — and for hire. . . . It is very strange."

Val appeared abashed and rather angry.

"Surely," said I, "one often wishes that people would wear characters not their own. Any change would be for the better."

Darnwell waved me down, and in so doing swished one of my Venetian glasses off the table.

"Forgive me," he said, with a cursory

glance at the remnants. "What I wish to say is that surely there is work to be done in the world which should engross all the powers which men fritter away behind the footlights."

"But the world must be amused," said I. "We can't *all* be so earnest and as devoid of humour as——"

Geraldine broke in eagerly: "I'm sure there are hundreds of good actors."

"Morally perhaps, not artistically!" I snapped. I was still thinking about my Venetian glass.

The discussion raged all the way upstairs. I was growing cross, and silently offered Darnwell a cigarette.

"Thanks," he said, "I give way to no appetites. Drink, love, tobacco—all are harmful to the higher life."

I lit up, just to occupy my mouth, which sheltered an unruly tongue at the moment, and took Val off in a corner,

leaving Geraldine to tackle the philanthropist.

"Where on earth did you get *that?*" asked Bankes, indicating the gentleman without appetites.

"Never mind; it's going in a minute. Look here, Val, you're not to flirt with my cousin. It's awfully good of you to hide your real feelings, you know; for, of course, you hate girls. But I can't go on demanding the sacrifice."

Val's countenance changed.

"Don't mention it," he said; "I—don't dislike her at all—in fact. . . ."

I made eyes at him.

"Dear Val," I said, "*I* know whom you love! though I should pretend *not* to. . . ."

He grew still more uncomfortable.

"You have always discouraged me so," he murmured.

"What could I do?" I asked. "You are

one of my dearest friends, and that is something. But you *must not* make Gerry like you. Even if you cared for her, her people wouldn't hear of it. . . ."

And yet, Bill, you used to say I wouldn't do for diplomacy!

Mrs. March to Lord Darraway

LETTER XI

Dear Bill,

Lazy as I am, I do hate doing things which are too easy. I had arranged a long amusing campaign, and, behold, in less than a month the fun is all over! It was not long before Gerry exhibited unmistakable signs of being in love. She has been brought up on curates, and of course Val Bankes is a revelation. He doesn't bore *her!* But then she isn't cursed with my exigent sense of humour. She has what I never will have—common-sense, which will be in abeyance only during the first rosy weeks of courtship. First she began to lose her appetite. One evening I reproved her for not eating. In the middle

of it all she turned a wan face upon me, and said :

" Mary, have you ever seen Mr. Bankes's cigarette-case ? "

I dissembled, as I had given it to him myself. It sometimes worries me to remember how many men there are going about full of gun-metal for which I paid !

" Which case is that, Gerry ? " I asked.

" Val has several."

" A gun-metal one studded with turquoises," said she. " It has ' Val ' written across it in a woman's handwriting."

" Oh, that one—yes. You know, actors are awfully lucky about getting presents from people."

" I wish I knew something about that case. . . ."

" You should ask him."

" Well, he saw me looking at it, and he did say it was from a woman . . . ' an

awfully good sort,' he said, 'but quite middle-aged.' . . ."

(These are the moments, Bill, which Providence invents for us as skids to clog our downward course!)

I am acquiring command of my facial muscles, so I only said:

"Val has lots of nice elderly women friends. You see, he's an orphan, which makes us all want to be kind to him."

Why should I bore you with the rest of this silly affair? I will skip the preliminaries—you can invent them for yourself—and come to the day when Val formally demanded to see me alone. Considering that he has been seeing me alone for several years past, this demand failed to impress me. As soon as he came in I saw that he had become a real man. His eyes burned, and his face was almost as pale as the marble god whom he resembles.

"Oh, Mrs. Charlie—Mary dear," he burst out at once, "*do* help me!"

The "quite middle-aged lady" feigned astonishment.

"Why, Val, you startle me! What's the matter?"

"Oh, I never thought I could feel like this! It's awful—it's really awful!"

"Don't be so wild, Val. You frighten me."

"You don't know what love is! Lucky for you."

"I don't! Tell me, then, if it makes you feel better?" (I was dying to tease him, but upon my word I hadn't the heart to!)

He tore up and down the room—of course, he'll never look like that on the stage, or he would make his fortune.

"Oh, it just takes you by the throat—and it clutches your heart—and you lie awake all night—and you're never hungry, and can't even smoke; and all the other women

are no more to you than Dutch dolls. . . . It's awful!"

I sat there thanking God that I had never loved the boy.

"I tell you, Mary, if she won't marry me, I'll—I'll—be a Trappist, by Jove!"

"Oh no, you won't, Val," I said quietly. "It would ruin your nails to dig your own grave; and one's own coffin is a terribly tight fit to sleep in."

"Then," said he, with unconscious humour, "I'll sleep in another fellow's."

"Perhaps you won't have to proceed to extremities. Who is the woman?"

"Why, can't you *see?* Geraldine, of course. . . . Do help me, Mary!" We shall be poor, of course, but I feel I can work like a demon for her."

"You shock me, Val—and I may say you pain me. Only a fortnight ago you said you loved *me*," and I hid a smile with my hand.

Val was past shame.

"Oh, *you* know how much that sort of thing is worth. Of course, I *do* like you awfully; I shall love to be your cousin."

(Bill, is this my punishment for the many occasions on which I've offered to be a man's sister?)

"Come and sit down by me, Val," I said, "and be sensible. Do you *really* care for Geraldine?"

"Of course I do! Don't you see how sweet she is?—like hawthorn after—poppies; like a fresh breeze after—oh, you know what I mean! I'm so used to spouting other chaps' ideas, I can't express my own. Do help me, Mary. . . ."

The long and short of it was that after a very serious talk with Val, I fetched down Gerry, and left the two creatures alone for an hour.

Isn't it curious that, though I never had the slightest tenderness for Val, I retired

to my bedroom and cried till I was all the colours of the rainbow?

I know that Love is a bird of passage; but oh, Bill, isn't he sweet and dear while he perches? . . .

We have been through an ordeal with Aunt Hester. Geraldine is really her own mistress—or will be in a few weeks, as her twenty-first birthday is nearly here; but she is very fond of Miss Treherne, who has been a mother to her all these years.

Of course, we wrote and invited Aunt Hester to come up and inspect Val. I had no room for her, so I engaged rooms for her at the nearest hotel. She arrived looking very grim. Her bonnet was a triumph of Truro millinery, and her mantle was of the jetty kind which one meets only in buses.

Geraldine let me receive her alone, while she huddled on the upper staircase.

"Well," said Miss Treherne, "you are taking a great responsibility, Mrs. March."

"Perhaps," said I; "but I've known Mr. Bankes for years."

"What is his occupation?"

"His grandfather was an earl."

"That in itself hardly constitutes an occupation."

"Some people live handsomely on it, but Mr. Bankes has a profession."

This was the rock on which there was danger of splitting, and I paused to gain courage.

"Of late years," I said, "numbers of the aristocracy have—er—gone on the stage—er—become artists . . . in fact, if peers did not occasionally remove actresses to another sphere, there would hardly he room for the ladies of good position who wish to embrace an artistic career——"

"I know nothing about that," said Aunt Hester. "It sounds interesting, but it

seems to have no bearing on Geraldine's affairs."

"On the contrary," I answered, "it has; I was coming to that. Mr. Bankes is—er—an artist." (That's the first lie I ever told.)

"Oh, one of those painter fellows? We get a good many in Cornwall in the summer."

"No, Mr. Bankes does not paint—that is to say, paints the manners of the——"

"Look here, Mrs. March," said Aunt Hester, politely but firmly, "*what does Mr. Bankes do?*"

I plunged.

"He's an actor."

The effect was instantaneous. Miss Treherne threw up her hands.

"Lord help us!" she ejaculated. Then, after a pause: "This won't do at all."

I heard a gasp at the keyhole. Gerry had evidently left the stairs.

"Oh," I said hastily, "you will simply *love* Val. He's so handsome, so well-bred, and *such* a favourite; and then, you know, he doesn't act much—I mean he isn't really an actor. Anyone can see that he's a gentleman first and an actor afterwards. . . ."

The old girl is terribly shrewd.

"Then," says she, "am I to understand that he is not even a good actor? . . ."

That was a facer. By this time I was perspiring. I was thankful enough when the door burst open, and Gerry sank palpitating on top of Aunt Hester. I meanly deserted. They talked for an hour, while I lay down trying to collect my scattered senses.

Next morning Val came to be interviewed. It was worse than a first night, he says. Thank goodness, Aunt Hester requested me to remain in the room.

"I understand, sir," said Miss Treherne, "that you are an actor."

"There are several opinions about that," said Val, glancing at me. Nervousness had suddenly endowed him with a power of repartee.

Miss Treherne looked stern.

"Do not be flippant," said she. "You wish to marry my niece. I must ask you several questions which may be painful to us both."

"I am ready," said Val nobly.

The old lady looked him over with grudging admiration.

"First of all," said she, "are you aware that my niece has £40,000?"

Val was staggered.

"I never dreamed of such a thing," he said simply.

Miss Treherne looked towards me.

"He did not know it," I said.

At that she softened.

"There are a few more questions I must ask you," said she. "Are you in the habit of falling in love?"

Val appealed to me.

"Am I, Mrs. Charlie?" he asked.

Wretched boy! He knew I was loyal.

"He has no bad habits, Miss Treherne," I answered.

"Do you feel," proceeded Madame Torquemada, "that you care for Geraldine more than you ever have for anyone else?"

"Yes, indeed," said Val, with conviction. "It's quite a different feeling; I've never had it before."

"I suppose," said Miss Treherne, "you have been obliged to—er—kiss a great many women?"

Val blushed.

"Well, not exactly *obliged*. . . ."

"On the stage, I mean."

"Oh, *that*. We very seldom kiss 'em, you

know. We make a dive at a girl's ear, and the audience don't see that it doesn't land anywhere."

All was doing well. I breathed freely.

"It must be a life of great temptation," said Miss Treherne solemnly.

"I think," said Val, with an amount of good sense which startled me, "no one life has more temptations than another. If a chap wants to be a blackguard, he doesn't have to go on the stage in order to be one."

"You may be right," said Aunt Hester. "At the same time I should be glad if you could make up your mind to leave the stage."

"Don't be selfish, Val," I murmured. "Give the others a chance."

"I'm not particularly keen about it," said Val; "only I shouldn't like Geraldine to support me."

"Surely, with your connections," sug-

gested Aunt Hester, "you could get something? Private secretary, now, to some Member of Parliament. . . ."

"You see, I can't spell very well," answered the modest boy.

They went on for some time like that, and the extraordinary end of the matter was that Val went away engaged, having kissed not only me, but Aunt Hester. The dear old thing actually blushed!

"A handsome creature," she remarked. "No wonder Gerry fell in love with him."

I knew the hair and the smile would do the business.

So there goes one of my warmest admirers. I wonder who will carry off the rest.

M.

Mrs. March to Lord Darraway

LETTER XII

Dear Bill,

Mrs. Brabazon is horrid about Val's engagement. I met her the other day at a woman's luncheon—a function which ruins the digestions of the women present, and the reputations of those who are absent. I suppose eating too much makes us all so uncomfortable that we long to blame somebody—hence scandal-mongering. It was the Americans, I believe, who invented hen-parties—not, if I can judge from those Yankees I've seen, that they are indifferent to males; but their men, poor dears, are all day grubbing "down-town," wherever that is, so if women want to give luncheons on week-days,

they must do without their men. Beatrice says her husband is so busy that he rushes out and consumes his mid-day meal in ten minutes; it is almost always tomato-soup and peach-pie, whatever that is. It sounds ghastly. I can't imagine *you* eating "peach-pie"!

Mrs. Bobby was as fascinating as ever. She sat opposite to me, and seemed to be thinking, between the courses, what she could say to irritate me. I don't know why, except that I've seen a good deal of Brian L'Estrange lately. Of course, all the women who knew Val were taken up with his engagement. Mrs. Trapper was very decent about it; she has too many interesting important affairs on hand to waste time over Val. She seems pretty genuine—except her hair—and *I* can't afford to say much about that. She spoke very pleasantly about Geraldine, and appeared to think the match charming.

Mrs. Ivor grew more and more vexed. No one else noticed it, but *I* know a sort of white look round the nostrils which she gets when she is angry. True to her methods, she clawed Val under pretence of patting him.

"I never understood," she said, in her soft voice, "why Valentine Bankes has so few friends amongst men. *I* don't believe him to be particularly vicious."

"Vicious!" said Dolly Trapper. "Why, Val is one of the sanest, cleanest, quietest boys I ever knew!"

"You think so?" said Mrs. Ivor. "Well, you ought to know."

Her face was peaceful as a summer day.

"Of course," said Dolly, "I make it a rule never to contest a point with a person older than myself, or one who has had far more experience; but I must stand up for Val. I think he's a good, dear, stupid lad!"

"And he has such a lovely mouth and teeth!" murmured an unmarried girl.

"And his hair waves naturally," said another.

"All aids to virtue," said Mrs. Ivor with sweet irony.

"I don't ask if a man's virtuous," said Lady Bloxton; "I ask, Is he amusing? If he ain't, somebody else may have him."

Mrs. Frant, a disciple of Mrs. Gulling, observed:

"I imagine they *are* amusing, and then they seem so."

"Perhaps," said Mrs. Trapper softly to me, "her standard isn't a high one. She looks stupid."

"I have taken Valentine Bankes's part," said Mrs. Ivor. "The other day I was told that he had had six serious affairs in a year. Now, I happen to *know* that it was only five, and I said so."

"How *can* you know about more than

one of them?" asked Dolly with deadly intent.

The hostess was so frightened that she rose, while Mrs. Bobby still held a strawberry between her finger and thumb, and for once Mrs. B. did something hastily—she popped the strawberry into her mouth, consequently her utterance was blocked as she left the room, and Dolly glided away to keep some interesting engagement; so peace was preserved.

Why do any of you have anything to do with Mrs. Brabazon? No doubt you ask yourself that question, and would like to ask us. So do we. The answer, I think, is that we are all afraid to be anything but charming to her. Val says it doesn't matter how you treat her; she stabs her friends in the back as often as she does her enemies.

But rather a curious thing has happened to her. I must tell you about it.

Mrs. B. gave a luncheon two days ago—not a hen one, but mixed—and I, to my shame be it said, went. Brian L'Estrange was there. She put him as far away from me at the table as she could, with a large clump of irises and peonies between us. Though low table decorations are the fashion with Mrs. Bobby, spite must be indulged, though smartness be sacrificed.

Her little house in Belgravia is the prettiest thing of the kind I ever saw—white outside and in, everything in it white, except its owner. It goes by the name of the White Sepulchre, and certainly it is in one sense a mausoleum, where are bleaching the bones of many a nice robust reputation. Who but Mrs. Brabazon would have had the courage to attempt a white drawing-room in London? The curtains are of cream brocade, the walls panelled, and the rugs on the parquet floor of white fur. On the day of the party there were

masses of azaleas, tulips and peonies, all rose-pink, in the corners, on the mantelpiece, and on the white piano; and Mrs. Bobby received us wearing a white Liberty satin, and a cluster of Mermet roses at her waist. It is the reward of the wicked and unsympathetic to look young long after they are middle-aged. No tears shed for the sorrows of others have worn channels on Mrs. Ivor's cheeks; and though her libellous insinuations turn the hair of her listeners gray, her own waving locks are as sunny as they were when she was twenty—sunny without the ministrations of the French artist in Buckingham Palace Road.

Dolly Trapper was not there. I fancy the breach between her and Mrs. B. B. is so wide that they can't invite each other any more. There was a smart peeress, two actresses, and two women whom I didn't know. The peeress tried to behave like

the actresses, and the other women aimed apparently at a judicious mixture of both styles. Miss Roland, the famous leading lady, has acquired the repose of a Vere de Vere, while Lady Boxhill cultivates a habit of gesticulation. I heard them talking with almost feverish interest.

"*How* I envy you your new part, Miss Roland!" sighed her ladyship.

"You'd soon be tired of it," said the actress. "*I* long for privacy and repose."

"I wish I could change with you. Will you go down to the country and amuse Boxhill, while I play your rôle and have Sanderson make love to me?" She simpered charmingly.

"Sanderson and I don't speak off the stage," said Miss Roland with a venomous look. "I hate him!"

"I've been told I had a talent for the

stage. Two palmists say so," said Lady Boxhill.

Miss Roland looked as if she knew those palmists. Just then in rustled Mrs. Sanderson. She is more dressed in the daytime and less dressed in the evening than any actor-manageress in London.

"I'm so sorry, dear!" she murmured, kissing Mrs. Brabazon. "Paquin kept me three hours."

"No one who sees the result can grudge the time," cooed Mrs. Bobby.

She was inwardly ravening, I know, for her luncheon was being ruined.

The men were Brian L'Estrange, a big Guardsman, two of Mrs. Bobby's infant school—sweet boys, who worship for the most part silently—an old baronet, Bertie Forbes and young Lord Leatherhead. How seldom a name is so happily descriptive! Luncheon was announced. I was on the other side of Leatherhead, and Mrs.

Bobby scarcely spoke to him. Brian had Lady Boxhill next to him, and, as I told you, a bank of flowers quite cut off my view of him.

Lord Leatherhead is serious. Picture a serious marquess of five-and-twenty at 2 p.m. on a warm day. It is my proud boast that I can talk to most men and make them laugh. But I think this young man must belong to a race where the heir, when he comes of age, is taken into the secret chamber and introduced to the family bogie. He never smiles again.

After a few minutes I began to wish that he had remained in the secret chamber and sent the family bogie to entertain me. All I could elicit (he ate conscientiously) was that he was writing a life of Bossuet, and had hopes of regenerating the Tory party. When the third course came on I gave him up. I had made one or two sprightly remarks, and he had re-

plied, "Ah!" "Oh!" "Really!" "Don't say so!" with about the animation of a prawn—after it's boiled.

Bertie Forbes was saying witty things in his low, drawly voice; L'Estrange was racketing along with his delicious brogue; Mrs. Bobby was flaying one of "her dearest friends"; and *I* was reduced to Leatherhead and the quiet boy next me. I saw revenge in all this. Mrs. B. hates everyone who isn't absolutely unsuccessful; and she likes L'Estrange. The tide of talk swelled about me like the sea, and I sat on my desert isle, high and dry. So I took notes.

How overheated and greedy people look at a summer luncheon! Some of the women got redder and redder. Lady Boxhill was on her third round of moselle-cup, and her voice, as well as her sentiments, made it plain why her lord prefers to remain in the country. Miss Roland

stuck to iced tea, and kept both her complexion and her dulcet tones. It was almost pathetic to see how Mrs. Sanderson fawned on her husband's leading lady. All the world should know that *she* wasn't jealous. A good many of her beautiful clothes would have to be gone without if she should quarrel with Olive Roland, for the public comes to see her more than Sanderson.

Mrs. Bobby was in her element. She had hobbled me and gagged me with a marquess. The game was in her own hands. At last it was over. As we passed into the drawing-room, she said affectionately: "I haven't heard your voice, dear Mrs. Charlie. I hope you're not ill?"

"On the contrary," said I, "I never felt fresher. I've just had a rest-cure."

We were all allowed to smoke in the white drawing-room. Lady Boxhill paraded her coroneted cigarette-case—a gold

one with turquoise small-pox—and told us that she dared not smoke unless "Jack" were in the country. As if anyone cared! She wanted the men to chaff her. Brian L'Estrange saw it, and came to the rescue, like a nice, kind Irishman as he is.

"I'll bet you, now," said he, "that Boxhill didn't give you that cigarette-case."

She was perfectly happy, as it is the aim of her life to appear improper and emancipated. As a fact, she's as dull as ditchwater and perfectly respectable; I suppose it's easy to be so when one looks rather like a horse.

Everybody compared cases. The Guardsman had one with this cynical inscription:

"Love is at best a tragic joke;
Begun in flame, it ends in smoke;
But he who takes to cigarettes,
Has soothing joys without regrets."

Brian's had: "Where there is so much smoke there must be some fire."

Miss Roland doesn't smoke. She says her teeth are a large part of her stock-in-trade, and she is afraid of spoiling them.

Mrs. Bobby hasn't yet finished with Val. She had a finishing anecdote to tell of him. She says that Mrs. Willie Breton was so in love with him that he was always afraid she might kiss him; so whenever he went there to supper he left some of his make-up on, thinking it might put her off.

"But," said Mrs. Bobby in conclusion, "Fanny Breton loves the taste of grease paint."

L'Estrange looked angry—Mrs. Breton is one of his friends—but he had no time to speak.

The parlourmaid flung open the door, and said something inarticulate. In came a pretty young woman and a handsome

young man. She was the image of Mrs. Brabazon, and the man had Austrian cavalry-man written all over him, from his tight trousers to his splendid fair moustache.

The lady looked a little confused by the sight of so many people, hesitated a little, then, blushing deeply, sprang forward and clasped Mrs. Brabazon in her arms.

"Mamma!" she cried.

I longed for a Kodak. Every jaw in the room dropped. I thought Lord Leatherhead would never get his again. There was an intense silence. The young lady released Mrs. Bobby.

"This," she said, turning to the young man, "is Toni."

"Toni" advanced—a very gallant figure—and kissed Mrs. Bobby's hand.

Mrs. Toni hovered near. Presently she said in a half-fearful undertone:

"The baby is outside."

Every eye turned to the door. There stood a dark-faced, smiling Bohemian *nounou*, holding an infant fastened to a *stechkissen*. You know the things that foreign babies are tied to—they look like cocoons.

Mrs. Brabazon was magnificent. I discovered afterwards that she hadn't seen her daughter for five years. But she rallied her forces and said: "My dear! Why didn't you wire? When did you arrive?"

The nurse brought in the baby—a perfect cherub—and *Mrs. Bobby's grandchild.* Consider that. The guests rose. I think they were all afraid to witness the meeting between the baby and grandmamma. Mrs. Bobby was nearly as white as her drawing-room. She bent over the baby and kissed it.

I don't think Nelson at Trafalgar was finer then she was at that moment. She was mortally wounded, and she deserved

Westminster Abbey or a peerage, or both,

"Isn't it a darling!" she said, with dry lips.

She called the people up to look at the child, and presented them to her daughter. I took pity on the poor Count (all well-bred Austrians are Counts), who couldn't speak any English. When he found that I knew German and had lived in Austria, he flooded me with explanations unhampered by reserve. His ma-in-law knew no German, so he let himself go. He and his Charlotte had been married for two years, but never would the inhuman mother let her child come to England. It seems the bugbear of Mrs. Brabazon's life was to be a grandmother. Clever as she is, however, she couldn't prevent that. At last Charlotte decided on a sort of *coup d'état.* So she came. It was awkward, of course, with all this company—

"Toni" waved his hand comprehensively —but there was no way of bringing "*Schwieger mama*" to her senses.

The Countess looked a charming girl—awfully afraid of her mother. We left, however, feeling that "Toni" would protect his family.

Later.

Mrs. Brabazon has got rid of the family by going to take a rest-cure in Wimpole Street.

Mrs. March to Lord Darraway

LETTER XIII

I HAVEN'T written for ages, Bill dear. I've been racketing, and am tired to death. Dolly Trapper and I have become great friends. She is such a broad-minded woman, who really enjoys life. She says she never had a single Calvinistic ancestor, and that is why she has a good time. She is a friend of Brian L'Estrange; that is, he isn't one of her admirers; at least, they don't flirt; they're just good pals; so we go about together. Lord Leatherhead is her newest young man. I can't think how she stands him. To be sure, he's good-looking, but he seldom speaks, and when he does he's so boring that nobody listens.

We four had a day of it yesterday! We began with the Academy, just to steady us. Dolly asked us to have a happy day with her, and so we met at Burlington House at 11.30. No need to describe the Academy. There are fewer babies and puppies and kittens than usual this year. The taste for maturity has even invaded the studies. The nudes were skied, and looked awfully ashamed of themselves, as they always do, somehow, under a British skylight. They seem always apologizing and begging for Turkish towels.

There were wonderful portraits by the Kitchener of Art. If I tell you who he is he may sue me for libel—or paint my portrait for nothing, which would enable me to turn the tables. He is cruel, but wonderful!

When our heads swam, and we were too tired to stand, we went across to Prince's

for luncheon. You know how I love restaurants! Yet I couldn't eat, somehow. Leatherhead was hungry, and he did not add to the gaiety of nations. Brian talked a lot. I wish he hadn't dark-blue eyes with curly black lashes. They worry me, somehow. Dolly isn't a bit catty; she's so young and lovely, she can afford to give plainer women a chance.

I couldn't help thinking, as I looked at L'Estrange and the marquess, that England was ill-judged in pouring out Irish blood in South Africa. It is needed for transfusion at home. The operation is so well understood now that nothing would be easier. Brian, for instance, has more blood than he needs. He might be improved by losing a little. What more sensible than to put some of it into Lord Leatherhead? In a few moments after the operation the peer would make a joke; Brian, on the other hand, would be less

flighty; and both would, by a simple process, attain the *juste milieu.*

After luncheon we rode about on a bus for some time. If we had been forced to do it we should have been furious. You should have seen people look at Dolly. She was in pale gray, encrusted with cream guipure, and her mahogany hair had just had a fresh coat. I think Leatherhead is in love with her. His mother will be in a wax if he marries her. She is divorced, you know. I forget who got it—nobody remembers now. She is so popular.

I love buses, and the conductor always understands me. Let no woman pose as a *femme incomprise* till she's tried the kindness of a bus-conductor. They sometimes offer to "send me up" things when they get down at the end of the route.

In England, the end as well as the beginning of everything is a public-house, so I'm afraid the offer means gin. Still, it is

very kind of any man to offer you what he cares for most himself.

Brian was delightful. The seats are rather small, but we sat close.

When we'd bussed enough, we all went to Bond Street for tea. By that time my nose needed powdering, and we retired to our respective homes.

We met at Dolly's for early dinner, and went to the play, which was funny, and made Lord Leatherhead laugh once. I never saw his teeth before, which is a pity, as they are beautiful. If Dolly marries him, it will be because she wants to know the family bogie. Perhaps they'll fetch him out for best man. They say he wails all night in his turret chamber when one of the family is about to marry, which shows that he is a discriminating bogie—for a bachelor.

We finished at the Berkleton. I am sorry that you're a man, Bill, for you can never

see the ladies' dressing-room at the Berkleton. It is small. Women walk up the back of your gown, especially if it is made of ancestral lace, as mine was. When, after patiently flattening myself against the wall for ten minutes, I secured a hand-glass, a woman came up and smilingly took it out of my hand.

I got into a corner and looked on. The glare of electric-light is pitifully trying to middle-aged town complexions. Out of twenty women, two put black on their eye-brows, five drew the pink pencil over their lips; but *all* powdered themselves. This mingling one's microbes with those of strangers is not a nice idea. But I wish beauty were catching! Nothing nice is—except love.

The attendants look harried. Oh, my dear, what opera-cloaks! They made me sick! Mine cost £3 12s. 6d. in Kensington High Street, and isn't paid for.

Dolly looked a dream. I felt sure that Lord Leatherhead would propose on the way home. We meant to go two by two—the sociable four-wheeler is Dolly's aversion.

The waiters made me rather sad; they looked depressed. They seemed to be saying: "Oh, the same bare backs, the same powdered noses, the same shiny gowns! Take us away and give us a rest."

We had not been long at supper before Brian whispered to me:

"Do you see Dolly's ex-husband at the next table?"

I felt hot and cold at once—one of those vicarious chills which altruistic natures suffer, and which help to age them. I looked, and saw a big, rather stout man, sitting fortunately just where Dolly couldn't see him. His face had the regulation Berkleton bloom—something between a mulberry and a cherry, with a bluish

glaze. His eyes were like a dead cod-fish's. When I saw him I began to understand how Dolly could endure Lord Leatherhead, who is well-set-up, clean-skinned, clear-eyed, and altogether a decent member of society.

Dolly prattled on, quite unconscious that her ivory shoulder was almost in contact with the horrid being she has luckily got rid of. What a curious feeling it must give one to casually meet as a stranger, or worse, as an enemy, the man who once swore to love and cherish one!

Poor Charlie hasn't got Mr. Trapper's complexion, at all events. . . .

This sight of Dolly's ex-husband made me unhappy somehow; and yet surely—*surely* a woman who has been badly treated ought to have another chance? . . .

In their usual engaging manner the powers that be turned out half the lights before we had come to the coffee. This

delicate hint that it was time to go home was very slowly taken by the pleasure-seekers at the tables.

"What happens when *all* the lights are out?" asked Dolly coquettishly, ignorant of the mulberry man at her elbow.

"This," said Brian, as she turned away, slipping his hand under the table and seizing mine.

It was weak of me, but I couldn't draw away. I felt suddenly cold and homeless and alone in that terrible crowd of half-clad women and hook-nosed men. Brian's hand was warm and consolatory. . . . And then we had to go. Brian took me home in a hansom. . . . I forget the rest.

Your affectionate

MARY.

LETTER XIV

I AM writing this letter to please myself, because if I don't I shall go to pieces.

I don't know whether I am happy or miserable. I don't know whether I am good or bad, or what I am going to do. My two selves are at it hammer and tongs, and I *myself* (which makes a third person !) am looking on with half-closed eyes like a person half-chloroformed, caring not at all which of the combatants gets the best of it.

It all comes from loneliness. When I think of the years—more than I dare count—that I've been going on, going on, trying to do without what I wanted most —trying to smother the strong cry of my soul, as one drowns a squealing kitten—

then I wonder how I've lived. Always to see other women loved and cherished and happy — and to be alone! Always to be bright and witty and lively—and to come home alone. Well, there comes a time when a woman can't bear it any longer. If I had a daughter it might be different. Perhaps I could grow old more gracefully —garland my middle-age with the flowers of her fragrant youth; I know I should have loved that fair daughter who has never come. But now I feel only that I have never lived. It is not only youth that won't endure — middle-age glides unnoticed into age, into a time when all the hair-dye in the world can't disguise us, when pink powder falls into wrinkles and hollows, when we have no more hope of being loved—that, perhaps, is the horror of age, in a nut-shell. And yet my best self knows and feels how small, how pitiful this view of life is. I am sitting to-day

before a lighted stage. On it my two selves are holding a dialogue—the black spirit and the white, which somehow, merged in one, make that strange gray personality which goes by the name of Mary March.

The white spirit says: "Life is not made for self-seeking. While there are millions of miserable creatures coming and going, is there nothing to do but to sit still, smiling, stretching out selfish hands for love?"

The black spirit answers: "Let those other creatures take care of themselves? There is a God who is responsible for them as He is for me. Am I less miserable? My hands are not selfish—they are only empty!"

And I sit meanwhile in the theatre half dazed, and listen unbiassed to these two warning spirits; and so the play goes on.

Something holds me back from the abyss. It is less the thought of Charlie than the consciousness that Bill loves me —Bill, the strongest, tenderest, manliest, most womanly being I've ever known. But Bill is far away; he won't come to me—he will never tell me that he loves me. . . . Once in Canada I was on a long toboggan whizzing down a frozen hillside. I believed that I was going to meet death at the foot of the hill, but I wouldn't have stopped for anything in the world. The exhilaration was so marvellous. . . . What is waiting at the foot of this hill? Who knows. Perhaps the wrong person is steering me; or, perhaps, like the mad, reckless, casual creature he is, he is not steering at all. He knows that the broken bones will be mine. . . . Masculine bones don't break—nor masculine hearts either. When a man stumbles over a commandment, it's the

commandment that goes to pieces, not the man.

Why do I think I love Brian? Is it because he is handsome? I don't believe it—many ugly men are charming. What is his charm? I go on analyzing, analyzing—I shall analyze my sensations on my deathbed, if I die in bed. . . .

I have never kissed any man but Bill and Charlie—Bill only once in a cousinly way, and Charlie so seldom in the last five years that I could count the times; but last week I kissed Brian. I suppose people who know how much I go about with men, and how freely I talk about them, think I'm on kissing terms with all of them. But I'm not—I never have been. I hate that sort of thing. I've never even fancied I really loved anyone till now. The misery of it is that I don't trust Brian. He seems to me the sort of man who would passionately implore a woman to elope

with him, and forget to meet her at the train.

If there's one quality one must demand in a lover, it is trustworthiness—a clumsy word for a very necessary thing.

When a woman begins to think about a man when he is away, she had better not see him any more. I know a dozen men whom I am always delighted to see, but when the door closes upon them, I experience no regret. Those are the comfortable men to have about one.

This other feeling is awful. I remember ı now, how he walked up and down ıd held forth on the subject of love. He said it was awful. So it is. It robs you of sleep—it makes you sick of everything. Each hour is a straining, wearing longing to see that one person who has mysteriously become the one figure in your landscape—the one solid fact of your life. When you see him, he alone is real, tan-

gible. The world is a shifting mist, or a tossing sea, where there is only one small bit of earth to which you can cling. . . . Is this love, or only passion? Which is which? Is this Nature's revenge for all the years during which I have crushed down these feelings? Who shall tell? I can't go to anyone. I shrink from sharing my wonderful secret. Brian is no help to me. He only smiles his sweet, brilliant smile, and says: "I believe you do love me, little woman!" And I say: "But, oh, Brian, do you love me?" He says: "You know I do. I'm awfully fond of you!"

"Awfully fond!" But *I* am tragic. I can't take it lightly. I have lived to be eight-and-thirty without this terrible disease, and that is why it is half killing me.

I feel that Brian is not serious in this, or in anything. How many women has *he* kissed? I should hate to know! Do men ever realize—will they ever learn—that

what is an episode to them is a sacrament to us? They kiss and ride away. That has not happened to me—let me be profoundly thankful. But it happens to other women every day. I had a friend once who worshipped and trusted a man. I saw her on the day when he left her for another woman, and I don't want to see anything like it again.

Bill says that "the man who thinks lightly of a woman's honour has very little of his own." . . . Dear Bill! How different my life would have been if he had not gone to South Africa! . . .

Geraldine Treherne and her aunt have asked Brian down to Cornwall for the wedding—and I am going—unless. . . .

How heavenly to be there by the sea with Brian! What will he seem like there, in the pure, beautiful country, I wonder?

Oh, this London—this London! I can't breathe here any more.

I shall try to be calm—to decide whether I am going to Falmouth. I must decide alone—not with Brian near me. I can't think when he is there. . . .

This letter must be destroyed; this pitiful letter to myself, not meant for Bill. There is another one on my desk for him—a poor, deceitful thing meant to reassure his kind heart.

Telegram from Lord Darraway to Mrs. March

Do nothing till you hear from me. I am coming.

BILL.

Lord Darraway to Mrs. March

LETTER VI

You have had my wire. I meant to leave for London the day I sent it, but was taken suddenly ill, and have literally not the strength to leave my room. Oh, Mary, Mary! for God's sake don't see that man again! Your letter came to me by mistake. I read spellbound until the end, never dreaming that it was not meant for me. You must forgive me, for I transgressed innocently. This is no time for phrases. How can I implore you, how persuade you, to break with L'Estrange? I know him. He will fling you aside like a soiled glove; he will forget that he ever knew you. He can't love; he doesn't know what it means. You force me to tell you

what I had meant never to say: *I* love you, my dear, dear Mary, with the love that has grown with my life, which is a part of me, and cannot change. But it is a love which asks nothing. The sacrifice must be mine, not yours. I will come to you; I am trying to be strong—only, only, oh, Mary, for God's sake don't see L'Estrange! How can I make you understand? I feel like a hysterical woman. . . . Promise me, my own dear love, that you will not see him. I am coming.

BILL.

Telegram from Mrs. March to Lord Darraway

CHARLIE died of fever last Thursday.

MARY.

Mrs. March to Lord Darraway

LETTER XV

As you are still too ill to come, I must write to you. The first agony of grief is past—yes, agony. Is it not strange that I should feel it so? It is, in a way, grief for being unable to grieve. Now that he is gone, I feel that I should have tried to be more to him. Poor Charlie dead! far away in that far land. I thank God he never knew what a mistake we had made; he was not analytical. I can't pretend—oh, let us have done with pretence!—that his death robs me of anything. But it has sobered me; his death and your letter have shown me what I am, what I might be. You were right: the dream is past. Let me tell you once for all, and then let us

never mention his name again, how L'Estrange has treated me. I sent him a telegram at once, telling him of Charlie's death. He did not answer, and yesterday I heard that he has returned to Africa. That was his love. . . . Are there many men like that, do you think?

Dear Bill, if you can bear the sight of me, come and help me. I feel very broken and very much alone; and there is a good deal to be done.

I don't weary you with all that I feel? I am bitter against myself—oh, so humble, so ashamed!—so hoping that you will still be my friend. It is through no virtue of mine that my case is less pitiable than it might be. Let my life, what is left of it, show my repentance.

MARY.

Lord Darraway to Mrs. March

LETTER VII

Dearest Mary—my Mary,

I can't realize that it is a year ago since I went to you, and found you a poor, pale, sad, changed Mary, who met me with downcast eyes. Why were you afraid of me? Did you think I should not love you because you were human? because a light, plausible scoundrel had tried to take advantage of you, and failed? That is my last word about the past. Since then the gorse has again grown golden, and now the heather will soon cover the land with royal robes of purple. And I shall come and fetch you, and years of blessed peace shall teach us the true meaning of life.

The gorse has faded, Mary, but the larks

are still singing. And so, my dear, my dear! though our spring has past, it has not taken with it all the music of life. When St. Martin's summer smiles upon us, it shall not find us without melody.

Yours always,

BILL.

(2)

THE END

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